Theophile
Gautier

25

The Works

OF

Theophile Gautier

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One of Cleopatra's Nights

CHAPTER I

A CHARMING HEAD

NINETEEN HUNDRED years ago from the date of this writing, a magnificently gilded and painted cangia was descending the Nile as rapidly as fifty long flat oars, which seemed to crawl over the furrowed water like the legs of a gigantic scarabæus, could impel it.

This cangia was narrow, long, elevated at both ends in the form of a new moon, elegantly proportioned, and admirably built for speed; the figure of a ram's head, surmounted by a golden globe, armed the point of the prow, showing that the vessel belonged to some personage of royal blood.

In the center of the vessel arose a flat-roofed cabin,—a sort of *naos,* or tent of honor, colored and gilded, ornamented with palm-leaf moldings, and lighted by four little square windows.

Two chambers, both decorated with hieroglyphic paintings, occupied the horns of the crescent. One of them, the larger, had a second story of lesser height built upon it—like the *chateaux gaillards* of those fantastic galleys of the sixteenth century, drawn by Della-Bella; the other and smaller chamber, which also served as a pilot-house, was surmounted with a triangular pediment.

In lieu of a rudder, two immense oars, adjusted upon stakes decorated with stripes of paint, which served in place of our modern rowlocks,—extended into the water in rear of the vessel like the webbed feet of a swan; heads crowned with *pshents* and bearing the allegorical horn upon their chins, were sculptured upon the handles of these huge oars, which were manoeuvred by the pilot as he stood upon the deck of the cabin above.

He was a swarthy man, tawny as new bronze, with bluish surface gleams playing over his dark skin, long oblique eyes, hair deeply black and all plaited into little cords, full lips, high cheekbones, ears standing out from the skull—the Egyptian type in all its purity. A narrow strip of cotton about his loins, together with five or six strings of glass beads, and a few amulets, comprised his whole costume.

He appeared to be the only one on board the cangia; for the rowers bending over their oars, and concealed from view by the gunwales, made their presence known only through the symmetrical movements of the oars themselves, which spread open alternately on either side of the vessel, like the ribs of a fan, and fell regularly back into the water after a short pause.

Not a breath of air was stirring; and the great triangular sail of the cangia, tied up and bound to the lowered mast with a silken cord, testified that all hope of the wind rising had been abandoned.

The noonday sun shot his arrows perpendicularly from above; the ashen-hued slime of the river banks reflected the fiery glow; a raw light, glaring and blinding in its intensity, poured down in torrents of flame; the azure of the sky whitened in the heat as a metal whitens in the furnace; an ardent and lurid fog smoked in the horizon. Not a cloud appeared in the sky—a sky mournful and changeless as Eternity.

The water of the Nile, sluggish and wan, seemed to slumber in its course, and slowly extend itself in sheets of molten tin. No breath of air wrinkled its surface, or bowed down upon their stalks the cups of the lotus-flowers, as rigidly motionless as though sculptured; at long intervals the leap of a bechir or fabaka expanding its belly, scarcely caused a silvery gleam upon the current; and the oars of the cangia seemed with difficulty to tear their way through the fuliginous film of that curdled water. The banks were desolate, a solemn and mighty sadness weighed upon this land, which was never aught else than a vast tomb, and in which the living appeared to be solely occupied in the work of burying the dead. It was an arid sadness, dry as pumice stone, without melancholy, without reverie, without one pearly grey cloud to follow toward the horizon, one secret spring wherein to lave one's dusty feet; the sadness of a sphinx weary of eternally gazing upon the desert, and unable to detach herself from the granite socle upon which she has sharpened her claws for twenty centuries.

So profound was the silence that it seemed as though the world had become dumb, or that the air had lost all power of conveying sound. The only noises which could be heard at intervals were the whisperings and stifled "chuckling" of the crocodiles, which, enfeebled by the heat, were wallowing among the bullrushes by the river banks; or the sound made by some ibis, which—tired of standing with one leg doubled up against its stomach, and its head sunk between its shoulders,—suddenly abandoned its motionless attitude, and brusquely whipping the blue air with its white wings, flew off to perch upon an obelisk or a palm-tree.

The cangia flew like an arrow over the smooth river-water, leaving behind it a silvery wake which soon disappeared; and only a few foam-bubbles rising to break at the surface of the stream bore testimony to the passage of the vessel, then already out of sight.

The ochre-hued or salmon-colored banks unrolled themselves rapidly like scrolls of papyrus between the double azure of water and sky—so similar in tint that the slender tongue of earth which separated them seemed like a causeway stretching over an immense lake, and that it would have been difficult to determine whether the Nile reflected the sky, or whether the sky reflected the Nile.

The scene continually changed: at one moment were visible gigantic propylæa, whose sloping walls, painted with large panels of fantastic figures, were mirrored in the river; pylons with broad-bulging capitals; stairways guarded by huge crouching sphinxes, wearing caps with lappets of many folds, and crossing their paws of black basalt below their sharply projecting breasts; palaces, immeasurably vast, projecting against the horizon the severe horizontal lines of their entablatures, where the emblematic globe unfolded its mysterious wings like an eagle's vast-extending pinions; temples with enormous columns thick as towers, on which were limned processions of hieroglyphic figures against a background of brilliant white; all the monstrosities of that Titanic architecture. Again the eye beheld only landscapes of desolate aridity:—hills formed of stony fragments from excavations and building works,—crumbs of that gigantic debauch of granite which lasted for more than thirty centuries; mountains exfoliated by heat, and mangled and striped with black lines which seemed like the cauterizations of a conflagration; hillocks humped and deformed, squatting like the criocephalus of the tombs, and projecting the outlines of their misshapen attitude against the sky-line; expanses of greenish clay, reddle, flour-white tufa, and from time to time some steep cliff of dry rose-colored granite, where yawned the black mouths of the stone quarries.

This aridity was wholly unrelieved; no oasis of foliage refreshed the eye; green seemed to be a color unknown to that nature; only some meagre palm-tree, like a vegetable crab, appeared from time to time in the horizon,—or a thorny fig-tree brandished its tempered leaves like sword blades of bronze,—or a carthamus-plant, which had found a little moisture to live upon in the shadow of some fragment of a broken column, relieved the general uniformity with a speck of crimson.

After this rapid glance at the aspect of the landscape, let us return to the cangia with its fifty rowers, and without announcing ourselves enter boldly into the *naos* of honor.

The interior was painted white with green arabesques, bands of vermillion, and gilt flowers fantastically shaped; an exceedingly fine rush matting covered the floor; at the further end stood a little bed, supported upon griffin's feet—having a back resembling that of a modern lounge or sofa, a stool with four steps to enable one to climb into bed, and (rather an odd luxury according to our ideas of comfort!) a sort of hemicycle of cedar wood, supported upon a single leg, and designed to fit the nape of the neck so as to support the head of the person reclining.

Upon this strange pillow reposed a most charming head,—one look of which once caused the loss of half-a-world,—an adorable, a divine head; the head of the most perfect woman that ever lived,—the most womanly and most queenly of all women; an admirable type of beauty which the imagination of poets could never invest with any new grace, and which dreamers will find forever in the depths of their dreams: it is not necessary to name Cleopatra.

Beside her stood her favorite slave Charmion, waving a large fan of ibis feathers; and a young girl was moistening with scented water the little reed blinds attached to the windows of the naos, so that the air might only enter impregnated with fresh odors.

Near the bed of repose, in a striped vase of alabaster with a slender neck and a peculiarly elegant, tapering shape—vaguely recalling the form of a heron,—was placed a bouquet of lotus-flowers, some of a celestial blue, others of a tender rose-color, like the finger-tips of Isis, the great goddess.

Either from caprice or policy, Cleopatra did not wear the Greek dress that day: she had just attended a panegyris, and was returning to her summer palace still clad in the Egyptian costume she had worn at the festival.

Perhaps our fair readers will feel curious to know how Queen Cleopatra was attired on her return from the Mammisi of Hermonthis whereat were worshipped the holy triad of the god Mandou, the goddess Ritho, and their son, Harphra: luckily we are able to satisfy them in this regard.

For headdress Queen Cleopatra wore a kind of very light helmet of beaten gold, fashioned in the form of the body and wings of the sacred partridge: the wings, opening downward like fans, covered the temples, and extending below almost to the neck, left exposed on either side through a small aperture, an ear rosier and more delicately curled than the shell whence arose that Venus whom the Egyptians named Athor;—the tail of the bird occupied that place where our women wear their chignons: its body covered with imbricated feathers, and painted in variegated enamel, concealed the upper part of the head; and its neck, gracefully curving forward over the forehead of the wearer, formed together with its little head a kind of horn-shaped ornament, all sparkling with precious stones;—a symbolic crest designed like a tower, completed this odd but elegant headdress. Hair dark as a starless night flowed from beneath this helmet, and streamed in long tresses over the fair shoulders whereof the commencement only, alas! was left exposed by a collarette or gorget adorned with many rows of serpentine stones, azodrachs, and chrysoberyls; a linen robe diagonally cut,—a mist of material, of woven air, *ventus textilis* as Petronius says,—undulated in vapory whiteness about a lovely body, whose outlines it scarcely shaded with the softest shading. This robe had half-sleeves, tight at the shoulder, but widening toward the elbows like our *manches-á-sabot,* and permitting a glimpse of an adorable arm and a perfect hand; the arm being clasped by six golden bracelets, and the hand adorned with a ring representing the sacred scarabæus. A girdle whose knotted ends hung down in front, confined this free-floating tunic at the waist; a short cloak adorned with fringing completed the costume; and if a few barbarous words will not frighten Parisian ears, we might add that the robe was called *schenti* and the short cloak *calisiris.*

Finally we may observe that Queen Cleopatra wore very thin light sandals, turned up at the toes, and fastened over the instep, like the *souliers-à-la-poulaine* of the mediæval *chatelaines.*

But Queen Cleopatra did not wear that air of satisfaction which becomes a woman conscious of being perfectly beautiful and perfectly well dressed: she tossed and turned in her little bed; and her rather sudden movements momentarily disarranged the folds of her gauzy *canopeum* which Charmion as often rearranged with inexhaustible patience, and without ceasing to wave her fan.

"This room is stifling," said Cleopatra;—"even if Pthah the God of Fire established his forges in here, he could not make it hotter: the air is like the breath of a furnace!" And she moistened her lips with the tip of her little tongue; and stretched out her hand like a feverish patient seeking an absent cup.

Charmion, ever attentive, at once clapped her hands; a black slave clothed in a short tunic hanging in folds like an Albanian petticoat, and a panther-skin thrown over his shoulders, entered with the suddenness of an apparition; with his left hand balancing a tray laden with cups and slices of water-melon, and carrying in his right a long vase with a spout like a modern teapot.

The slave filled one of these cups,—pouring the liquor into it from a considerable height with marvelous dexterity,—and placed it before the queen. Cleopatra merely touched the beverage with her lips, laid the cup down beside her, and turning upon Charmion her beautiful liquid black eyes lustrous with living light, exclaimed:

"O, Charmion, I am weary unto death!"

Chapter II

STRANGE ADVENTURER

Charmion, at once anticipating a confidence, assumed a look of pained sympathy, and drew nearer to her mistress.

"I am horribly weary!" continued Cleopatra, letting her arms fall like one utterly discouraged;—"this Egypt crushes, annihilates me; this sky with its implacable azure is sadder than the deep night of Erebus,—never a cloud! never a shadow, and always that red sanguine sun which glares down upon you like the eye of a Cyclops. Ah, Charmion, I would give a pearl for one drop of rain! From the inflamed pupil of that sky of bronze no tear has ever yet fallen upon the desolation of this land; it is only a vast covering for a tomb,—the dome of a necropolis,—a sky dead and dried up like the mummies it hangs over; it weighs upon my shoulders like an over-heavy mantle; it constrains and terrifies me; it seems to me that I could not stand up erect without striking my forehead against it. And, moreover, this land is truly an awful land;—all things in it are gloomy, enigmatic, incomprehensible! Imagination has produced in it, only monstrous chimeræ and monuments immeasurable; this architecture and this art fill me with fear; those colossi, whose stone-entangled limbs compel them to remain eternally sitting with their hands upon their knees, weary me with their stupid immobility,—they trouble my eyes and my horizon. When indeed shall the giant come who is to take them by the hand and relieve them from their long watch of twenty centuries? For even granite itself must grow weary at last! Of what master, then, do they await the coming, to leave their mountain-seats and rise in token of respect? of what invisible flock are those huge sphinxes the guardians, crouching like dogs on the watch, that they never close their eye-lids and forever extend their claws in readiness to seize? why are their stony eyes so obstinately fixed upon eternity and infinity? what weird secret do their firmly locked lips retain within their breasts? On the right hand, on the left, whithersoever one turns, only frightful monsters are visible,—dogs with the heads of men; men with the heads of dogs; chimæras begotten of hideous couplings in the shadowy depths of the labyrinths; figures of Anubis, Typhon, Osiris; partridges with great yellow eyes that seem to pierce through you with their inquisitorial gaze, and see beyond and behind you things which one dare not speak of,—a family of animals and horrible gods with scaly wings, hooked beaks, trenchant claws,—ever ready to seize and devour you should you venture to cross the threshold of the temple, or lift a corner of the veil.

"Upon the walls, upon the columns; on the ceilings, on the floors; upon palaces and temples; in the long passages and the deepest pits of the necropoli,—even within the bowels of the earth where light never comes, and where the flames of the torches die for want of air; for ever and everywhere are sculptured and painted interminable hieroglyphics, telling in language unintelligible of things which are no longer known, and which belong, doubtless, to the vanished creations of the past;—prodigious buried works wherein a whole nation was sacrificed to write the epitaph of one king! Mystery and granite!—this is Egypt; truly a fair land for a young woman, and a young queen!

"Menacing and funereal symbols alone meet the eye,—the emblems of the *pedum*, the *tau*, allegorical globes, coiling serpents, and the scales in which souls are weighed,—the Unknown, death, nothingness! In the place of any vegetation only *stelae* limned with weird characters; instead of avenues of trees avenues of granite obelisks; in lieu of soil vast pavements of granite for which whole mountains could each furnish but one slab; in place of a sky ceilings of granite:—eternity made palpable,—a bitter and everlasting sarcasm upon the frailty and brevity of life!—stairways built only for the limbs of Titans, which the human foot cannot ascend save by the aid of ladders; columns that a hundred arms cannot encircle; labyrinths in which one might travel for years without discovering the termination!—the vertigo of enormity,—the drunkenness of the gigantic,—the reckless efforts of that pride which would at any cost engrave its name deeply upon the face of the world!

"And, moreover, Charmion, I tell you a thought haunts me which terrifies me:—in other lands of the earth, corpses are burned, and their ashes soon mingle with the soil. Here, it is said that the living have no other occupation than that of preserving the dead; potent balms save them from destruction; the remains endure after the soul has evaporated;—beneath this people lie twenty peoples;—each city stands upon twenty layers of necropoli;—each generation which passes away leaves a population of mummies to a shadowy city; beneath the father you find the grandfather and the great-grandfather in their gilded and painted boxes, even as they were during life; and should you dig down forever, forever you would still find the underlying dead.

"When I think upon those bandage-swathed myriads,—those multitudes of parched specters who fill the sepulchral pits and who have been there for two thousand years, face to face in their own silence which nothing ever breaks, not even the noise which the grave-worms make in crawling, and who will be found intact after yet another two thousand years with their crocodiles, their cats, their ibises, and all things that lived in their lifetime,—then terrors seize me, and I feel my flesh creep! What do they mutter to each other?—for they still have lips; and every ghost would find its body in the same state as when it quitted it, if they should all take the fancy to return!

"Ah, truly is Egypt a sinister kingdom, and little suited to me, the laughter-loving and merry one!—everything in it encloses a mummy: that is the heart and the kernel of all things. After a thousand turns you must always end there;—the pyramids themselves hide sarcophagi. What nothingness and madness is this! Disembowel the sky with gigantic triangles of stone,—you cannot hereby lengthen your corpse an inch. How can one rejoice and live in a land like this, where the only perfume you can respire is the acrid odor of the naphtha and bitumen which boil in the caldrons of the embalmers, where the very flooring of your chamber sounds hollow because the corridors of the hypogea and the mortuary pits extend even under your alcove? To be the queen of mummies,—to have none to converse with but statues in constrained and rigid attitudes,—this is in truth a cheerful lot! Again: if I only had some heartfelt passion to relieve this melancholy—some interest in life; if I could but love somebody or something—if I were even loved! but I am not!

"This is why I am weary, Charmion: with love this grim and arid Egypt would seem to me fairer than even Greece with her ivory gods, her temples of snowy marble, her groves of laurel and fountains of living water. There I should never dream of the weird face of Anubis, and the ghastly terrors of the cities under ground."

Charmion smiled incredulously: "That ought not, surely, to be a source of much grief to you, O queen; for every glance of your eyes transpierces hearts, like the golden arrows of Eros himself."

"Can a queen," answered Cleopatra, "ever know whether it is her face or her diadem that is loved? The rays of her starry crown dazzle the eyes and the heart:—were I to descend from the height of my throne, would I even have the celebrity or the popularity of Bacchis or Archianassa?—of the first courtesan from Athens or Miletus? A queen is something so far removed from men,—so elevated, so widely separated from them,—so impossible for them to reach! What presumption dare flatter itself in such an enterprise? It is not simply a woman: it is an august and sacred being that has no sex, and that is worshipped kneeling without being loved. Who was ever really enamoured of Hera, the snowy-armed, or Pallas of the sea-green eyes?—who ever sought to kiss the silver feet of Thetis or the rosy fingers of Aurora?—what lover of the divine beauties ever took unto himself wings that he might soar to the golden palaces of heaven? Respect and fear chill hearts in our presence; and in order to obtain the love of our equals, one must descend into those necropoli of which I have just been speaking!"

Although she offered no further objection to the arguments of her mistress, a vague smile which played about the lips of the handsome Greek slave, showed that she had little faith in the inviolability of the royal person.

"Ah," continued Cleopatra, "I wish that something would happen to me,—some strange unexpected adventure! The songs of the poets; the dances of the Syrian slaves; the banquets, rose garlanded, and prolonged into the dawn; the nocturnal races; the Laconian dogs; the tame lions; the humpbacked dwarfs;

the brotherhood of the Inimitables; the combats of the arena; the new dresses; the byssus robes; the clusters of pearls; the perfumes from Asia; the most exquisite of luxuries, the wildest of splendors—nothing any longer gives me pleasure; everything has become indifferent to me—everything is insupportable to me!"

"It is easily to be seen," muttered Charmion to herself, "that the queen has not had a lover, nor had anyone killed for a whole month."

Fatigued with so lengthy a tirade, Cleopatra once more took the cup placed beside her, moistened her lips with it; and putting her head beneath her arm, like a dove putting its head under its wing, composed herself for slumber as best she could. Charmion unfastened her sandals, and commenced to gently tickle the soles of her feet with a peacock's feather; and Sleep soon sprinkled his golden dust upon the beautiful eyes of Ptolemy's sister.

While Cleopatra sleeps, let us ascend upon deck and enjoy the glorious sunset view. A broad band of violet color, warmed deeply with ruddy tints toward the west, occupies all the lower portion of the sky; encountering the zone of azure above, the violet shade melts into a clear lilac, and fades off through half-rosy tints, into the blue beyond: afar, where the sun, red as a buckler fallen from the furnace of Vulcan casts his burning reflection, the deeper shades turn to pale citron hues, and glow with turquoise tints. The water rippling under an oblique beam of light, shines with the dull gleam of the quicksilvered side of a mirror, or like a damascened blade: the sinuosities of the bank, the reeds, and all objects along the shores are brought out in sharp black relief against the bright glow. By the aid of this crepuscular light you may perceive afar off, like a grain of dust floating upon quicksilver, a little brown speck trembling in the net work of luminous ripples. Is it a teal diving?—a tortoise lazily drifting with the current?—a crocodile raising the tip of his scaly snout above the water to breathe the cooler air of evening?—the belly of a hippopotamus gleaming amid-stream; or, perhaps a rock left bare by the falling of the river: for the ancient Opi-Mou, Father of Waters, sadly needs to replenish his dry urn from the solstitial rains of the Mountains of the Moon.

It is none of of these.—By the atoms of Osiris so deftly resewn together! it is a man, who seems to walk, to skate upon the water!—now the frail bark which sustains him becomes visible,—a very nutshell of a boat,—a hollow fish!—three strips of bark fitted together, (one for the bottom and two for the sides) and strongly fastened at either end by cord well smeared with bitumen. The man stands erect with one foot on either side of this fragile vessel, which he impels with a single oar that also serves the purpose of a rudder;—and although the royal cangia moves rapidly under the efforts of the fifty rowers, the little black bark visibly gains upon it.

Cleopatra desired some strange adventure, something wholly unexpected; this little bark which moves so mysteriously seems to us to be conveying an adventure, or at least an adventurer. Perhaps it contains the hero of our story;—the thing is not impossible.

At any rate he was a handsome youth of twenty, with hair so black that it seemed to own a tinge of blue, a skin blonde as gold, and a form so perfectly proportioned that he might have been taken for a bronze statue by Lysippus;—although he had been rowing for a very long time he betrayed no sign of fatigue, and not a single drop of sweat bedewed his forehead.

The sun half sank below the horizon; and against his broken disk figured the dark silhouette of a far distant city, which the eye could not have distinguished but for this accidental effect of light; his radiance soon faded altogether away; and the stars,—fair nightflowers of heaven,—opened their chalices of gold in the azure of the firmament. The royal cangia closely followed by the little bark, stopped before a huge marble stairway, whereof each step supported one of those sphinxes that Cleopatra so much detested. This was the landing place of the summer palace.

Cleopatra, leaning upon Charmion, passed swiftly like a gleaming vision between a double line of lantern-bearing slaves.

The youth took from the bottom of his little boat a great lion-skin, threw it across his shoulders, drew the tiny shell upon the beach, and wended his way toward the palace.

Chapter III

NO IMPRESSION

Who is this young man, balancing himself upon a fragment of bark, who dares to follow the royal cangia, and is able to contend in a race of speed against fifty strong rowers from the land of Kush, all naked to the waist, and anointed with palm-oil? what secret motive urges him to this swift pursuit? That, indeed, is one of the many things we are obliged to know in our character of the intuition-gifted poet, for whose benefit all men, and even all women (a much more difficult matter) must have in their breasts that little window which Momus of old demanded.

It is not a very easy thing to find out precisely what a young man from the land of Kemi,—who followed the barge of Cleopatra, queen and goddess Evergetes, on her return from the Mammisi of Hermonthis two thousand years ago,—was then thinking of. But we shall make the effort notwithstanding.

Meïamoun, son of Mandouschopsch, was a youth of strange character; nothing by which ordinary minds are affected made any impression upon him; he seemed to belong to some loftier race, and might well have been regarded as the offspring of some divine adultery. His glance had the steady brilliancy of a falcon's gaze; and a serene majesty sat on his brow as upon a pedestal of marble; a noble pride curled his upper lip, and expanded his nostrils like those of a fiery horse;—although owning a grace of form almost maidenly in its delicacy, and though the bosom of the fair and effeminate god Dionysos was not more softly rounded or smoother than his, yet beneath this soft exterior were hidden sinews of steel, and the strength of Hercules—a strange privilege of certain antique natures to unite in themselves the beauty of woman with the strength of man!

As for his complexion, we must acknowledge that it was of a tawny orange color,—a hue little in accordance with our white-and-rose ideas of beauty, but which did prevent him from being a very charming young man, much sought after by all kinds of women,—yellow, red, copper-colored, sooty-black, or golden skinned; and even by one fair white Greek.

Do not suppose from this that Meïamoun's lot was altogether enviable;—the ashes of aged Priam, the very snows of Hippolytus, were not more insensible or more frigid;—the young white-robed neophyte preparing for the initiation into the mysteries of Isis led no chaster life;—the young maiden benumbed by the icy shadow of her mother was not more shyly pure.

Nevertheless, for so coy a youth, the pleasures of Meïamoun were certainly of a singular nature:—he would go forth quietly some morning with his little buckler of hippopotamus hide, his *harpe* or curved sword, a triangular bow and a snakeskin quiver, filled with barbed arrows; then he would ride at a gallop far into the desert upon his slender-limber, small-headed, wild-maned mare, until he could find some lion-tracks:—he especially delighted in taking the little lion-cubs from underneath the belly of their mother. In all things he loved the perilous or the unachievable; he preferred to walk where it seemed impossible for any human being to obtain a foothold, or to swim in a raging torrent; and he had accordingly chosen the neighborhood of the cataracts for his bathing place in the Nile: the Abyss called him!

Such was Meïamoun, son of Mandouschopsh.

For some time his humors had been growing more savage than ever: during whole months he buried himself in the Ocean of Sands, returning only at long intervals. Vainly would his uneasy mother lean from her terrace, and gaze anxiously down the long road with tireless eyes. At last after weary waiting, a little whirling cloud of dust would become visible in the horizon; and finally the cloud would open to allow a full view of Meïamoun, all covered with dust, riding upon a mare gaunt as a wolf with red and blood-shot eyes, nostrils trembling, and huge scars along her flanks,—scars which certainly were not made by spurs!

After having hung up in his room some hyena or lion skin, he would start off again.

And yet no one might have been happier than Meïamoun: he was beloved by Nephthe, daughter of the priest Afomouthis, and the loveliest woman of the Nome Arsinoïtes. Only such a being as Meïamoun could have failed to see that Nephthe had the most charmingly oblique and indescribably voluptuous eyes, a mouth sweetly illuminated by ruddy smiles; little teeth of wondrous whiteness and transparency: arms exquisitely round, and feet more perfect than the jasper feet of the statue of Isis:—assuredly there was not a smaller hand nor longer hair than hers in all Egypt. The charms of Nephthe could have been eclipsed only by those of Cleopatra. But who could dare to dream of loving Cleopatra? Ixion, enamoured of Juno, strained only a cloud to his bosom, and must forever roll the wheel of his punishment in hell.

It was Cleopatra whom Meïamoun loved.

He had at first striven to tame this wild passion; he had wrestled fiercely with it: but love cannot be strangled even as a lion is strangled; and the strong skill of the mightiest athlete avails nothing in such a contest. The arrow had remained in the wound, and he carried it with him everywhere;—the radiant and splendid image of Cleopatra with her golden-pointed diadem and her imperial purple, standing above a nation on their knees, illumined his nightly dreams and his waking thoughts: like some imprudent man who has dared to look at the sun and forever thereafter beholds an impalpable blot floating before his eyes,—so Meïamoun ever beheld Cleopatra. Eagles may gaze undazzled at the sun; but what diamond eye can with impunity fix itself upon a beautiful woman—a beautiful queen?

He commenced at last to spend his life in wandering about the neighborhood of the royal dwelling, that he might at least breathe the same air as Cleopatra,—that he might sometimes kiss the almost imperceptible print of her foot upon the sand (a happiness, alas! rare indeed): he attended the sacred festivals and *panegyreis* striving to obtain one beaming glance of her eyes—to catch in passing one stealthy glimpse of her loveliness in some of its thousand varied aspects. At other moments filled with sudden shame of this mad life, he gave himself up to the chase with redoubled ardor, and sought by fatigue to tame the ardor of his blood and the impetuosity of his desires.

He had gone to the panegyris of Hermonthis; and in the vague hope of beholding the queen again for an instant as she disembarked at the summer palace, had followed her cangia in his boat,—little heeding the sharp stings of the sun,—through a heat intense enough to make the panting sphinxes melt in lava-sweat upon their reddened pedestals.

And then he felt that the supreme moment was nigh,—that the decisive instant of his life was at hand; and that he could not die with his secret in his breast.

It is a strange situation, truly, to find one's self enamored of a queen; it is as though one loved a star,—yet she, the star, comes forth nightly to sparkle in her place in heaven: it is a kind of mysterious rendezvous;—you may find her again, you may see her; she is not offended at your gaze! O, misery! to be poor, unknown, obscure, seated at the very foot of the ladder,—and to feel one's heart breaking with love for something glittering, solemn, and magnificent,—for a woman whose meanest female attendant would scorn you!—to gaze fixedly and fatefully upon one who never sees you, who never will see you;—one to whom you are no more than a ripple on the sea of humanity, in nowise differing from the other ripples; and who might a hundred times encounter you without once recognizing you!—to have no reason to offer, should an opportunity for addressing her present itself, in excuse for such mad audacity; neither poetical talent, nor great genius, nor any superhuman qualifications,—nothing but love; and to be able to offer in exchange for beauty, nobility, power, and all imaginable splendor, only one's passion and one's youth,—rare offerings, forsooth!

Such were the thoughts which overwhelmed Meïamoun; lying upon the sand, supporting his chin on his palms, he permitted himself to be lifted and borne away by the inexhaustible current of reverie;—he sketched out a thousand projects, each madder than the last. He felt convinced that he was seeking after the unattainable; but he lacked the courage to frankly renounce his undertaking; and a perfidious hope came to whisper some lying promises in his ear.

"Athor, mighty goddess," he murmured in a deep voice,—"what evil have I done against thee that I should be made thus miserable?—art thou avenging thyself for my disdain of Nephthe, daughter of the priest Afomouthis?—hast thou afflicted me thus for having rejected the love of Lamia, the Athenian hetaira, or of Flora, the Roman courtesan? Is it my fault that my heart should be sensible only to the matchless beauty of thy rival, Cleopatra? Why hast thou wounded my soul with the envenomed arrow of unattainable love? What sacrifice, what offerings dost thou desire? Must I erect to thee a chapel of the rosy marble of Syene with columns crowned by gilded capitals, a ceiling all of one block, and hieroglyphics deeply sculptured by the best workmen of Memphis and of Thebes? Answer me!"

Like all gods or goddesses thus invoked, Athor answered not a word; and Meïamoun resolved upon a desperate expedient.

Cleopatra, on her part, likewise invoked the goddess Athor; she prayed for a new pleasure, for some fresh sensation: as she languidly reclined upon her couch, she thought to herself that the number of the senses was sadly limited; that the most exquisite refinements of delight soon yielded to satiety; and that it was really no small task for a queen to find means of occupying her time. To test new poisons upon slaves; to make men fight with tigers, or gladiators with each other; to drink pearls dissolved; to swallow the wealth of a whole province: all these things had become commonplace and insipid!

Charmion was fairly at her wit's end; and knew not what to do for her mistress.

Suddenly a whistling sound was heard; and an arrow buried itself, quivering, in the cedar wainscoting of the wall.

Cleopatra well-nigh fainted with terror. Charmion ran to the window, leaned out, and beheld only a flake of foam on the surface of the river. A scroll of papyrus encircled the wood of the arrow; it bore only these words written in Phœnician characters: "I love you!"

Chapter IV

COMPREHENSION

"I love you," repeated Cleopatra, making the serpent-coiling strip of papyrus writhe between her delicate white fingers; "those are the words I longed for; what intelligent spirit, what invisible genius has thus so fully comprehended my desire?"

And thoroughly aroused from her languid torpor, she sprang out of bed with the agility of a cat which has scented a mouse, placed her little ivory feet in her embroidered *tatbebs,* threw a byssus tunic over her shoulders, and ran to the window from which Charmion was still gazing.

The night was clear and calm; the risen moon outlined with huge angles of light and shadow the architectural masses of the palace, which stood out in strong relief against a background of bluish transparency; and the waters of the river wherein her reflection lengthened into a shining column, was frosted with silvery ripples: a gentle breeze, such as might have been mistaken for the respiration of the slumbering sphinxes, quivered among the reeds and shook the azure bells of the lotus flowers; the cables of the vessels moored to the Nile's banks groaned feebly; and the rippling tide moaned upon the shore like a dove lamenting for its mate. A vague perfume of vegetation, sweeter than that of the aromatics burned in the *anschir* of the priests of Anubis, floated into the chamber. It was one of those enchanted nights of the Orient, which are more splendid than our fairest days; for our sun can ill compare with that Oriental moon.

"Do you not see far over there, almost in the middle of the river, the head of a man, swimming? See! he crosses that track of light, and passes into the shadow beyond!—he is already out of sight!" And supporting herself upon Charmion's shoulder she leaned out, with half of her fair body beyond the sill of the window, in the effort to catch another glimpse of the mysterious swimmer. But a grove of Nile acacias, dhoum-palms, and sayals flung its deep shadow upon the river in that direction, and protected the flight of the daring fugitive. If Meïamoun had but had the courtesy to look back, he might have beheld Cleopatra, the sidereal queen, eagerly seeking him through the night gloom,—he, the poor obscure Egyptian! the miserable lion-hunter!

"Charmion! Charmion! send hither Phrehipephbour, the chief of the rowers; and have two boats dispatched in pursuit of that man!"—cried Cleopatra, whose curiosity was excited to the highest pitch.

Phrehipephbour appeared,—a man of the race of Nahasi, with large hands and muscular arms; wearing a red cap not unlike a Phrygian helmet in form, and clad only in a pair of narrow drawers diagonally striped with white and blue. His huge torso, entirely nude, black and polished like a globe of jet, shone under the lamplight. He received the commands of the queen and instantly retired to execute them.

Two long narrow boats so light that the least inattention to equilibrium would capsize them, were soon cleaving the waters of the Nile with hissing rapidity under the efforts of the twenty vigorous rowers; but the pursuit was all in vain. After searching the river banks in every direction, and carefully exploring every patch of reeds, Phrehipephbour returned to the palace; having only succeeded in putting to flight some solitary heron which had been sleeping on one leg, or in troubling the digestion of some terrified crocodile.

So intense was the vexation of Cleopatra at being thus foiled, that she felt a strong inclination to condemn Phrehipephbour either to the wild beasts, or to the hardest labor at the grindstone. Happily Charmion interceded for the trembling unfortunate who turned pale with fear despite his black skin. It was the first time in Cleopatra's life that one of her desires had not been gratified as soon as expressed; and she experienced in consequence a kind of uneasy surprise,—a first doubt, as it were of her own omnipotence.

She, Cleopatra, wife and sister of Ptolemy,—she who had been proclaimed goddess Evergetes, living queen of the regions Above and Below, Eye of Light, Chosen of the Sun (as may still be read within the cartouches sculptured on the walls of the temples),—she to find an obstacle in her path! to have wished aught that failed of accomplishment! to have spoken and not been obeyed! As well be the wife of some wretched Paraschistes,—some corpse-cutter,—and melt natron in a caldron! It was monstrous, preposterous!—and none but the most gentle and clement of queens could have refrained from crucifying that miserable Phrehipephbour!

You wished for some adventure, something strange and unexpected: your wish has been gratified. You find that your kingdom is not so dead as you deemed it. It was not the stony arm of a statue which shot that arrow;—it was not from a mummy's heart that came those three words which have moved even you,—you who smilingly watched your poisoned slaves dashing their heads and beating their feet upon your beautiful mosaic and porphyry pavements, in the convulsions of death-agony!—you who even applauded the tiger which boldly buried its muzzle in the flank of some vanquished gladiator!

You could obtain all else you might wish for: chariots of silver starred with emeralds; griffin-quadrigeræ; tunics of purple thrice-dyed; mirrors of molten steel, so clear that you might find the charms of your loveliness faithfully copied in them; robes from the land of Serica so fine and subtly light that they could be drawn through the ring worn upon your little finger; orient pearls of wondrous color; cups wrought by Myron or Lysippus; Indian paroquets that speak like poets:—all things else you could obtain, even should you ask for the Cestus of Venus or the *pshent* of Isis; but most certainly you cannot this night capture the man who shot the arrow which still quivers in the cedar wood of your couch.

The task of the slaves who must dress you tomorrow will not be a grateful one; they will hardly escape with blows: the bosom of the unskillful waitingmaid will be apt to prove a cushion for the golden pins of the toilette; and the poor hairdresser will run great risk of being suspended by her feet from the ceiling.

"Who could have had the audacity to send me this avowal upon the shaft of an arrow? Could it have been the Nomarch Amoun-Ra who fancies himself handsomer than the Apollo of the Greeks?—what think you, Charmion?—or perhaps Cheâpsiro, commander of Hermothybia, who is so boastful of his conquests in the land of Kush? Or is it not more likely to have been young Sextus, that Roman debauchee who paints his face, lisps in speaking, and wears sleeves in the fashion of the Persians?"

"Queen, it was none of those: though you are indeed the fairest of women, those men only flatter you; they do not love you. The Nomarch Amoun-Ra has chosen himself an idol to which he will be forever faithful; and that is his own person: the warrior Cheâpsiro thinks of nothing save the pleasure of recounting his victories;—as for Sextus, he is so seriously occupied with the preparation of a new cosmetic that he cannot dream of anything else. Besides he had just purchased some Laconian dresses, a number of yellow tunics embroidered with gold, and some Asiatic children which absorb all his time. Not one of those fine lords would risk his head in so daring and dangerous an undertaking;—they do not love you well enough for that.

"Yesterday in your cangia, you said that men dared not fix their dazzled eyes upon you; that they knew only how to turn pale in your presence,—to fall at your feet and supplicate your mercy; and that your sole remaining resource would be to awake some ancient, bitumen-perfumed Pharaoh from his gilded coffin. Now here is an ardent and youthful heart that loves you: what will you do with it?"

Cleopatra that night sought slumber in vain; she tossed feverishly upon her couch, and long and vainly invoked Morpheus the brother of Death;—she incessantly repeated that she was the most unhappy of queens,—that everyone sought to persecute her,—and that her life had become insupportable: woeful lamentations which had little effect upon Charmion, although she pretended to sympathize with them.

Let us for awhile leave Cleopatra to seek fugitive sleep, and direct her suspicions successively upon each noble of the court;—let us return to Meïamoun;—and as we are much more sagacious than Phrehipephbour, chief of the rowers, we shall have no difficulty in finding him.

Terrified at his own hardihood Meïamoun had thrown himself into the Nile, and had succeeded in swimming the current and gaining the little grove of dhoum-palms, before Phrehipephbour had even launched the two boats in pursuit of him.

When he had recovered breath, and brushed back his long black locks, all damp with river foam, behind his ears, he began to feel more at ease,—more inwardly calm. Cleopatra possessed something which had come from him; some sort of communication was now established between them: Cleopatra was thinking of him,—Meïamoun! Perhaps that thought might be one of wrath; but then he had at least been able to awake some feeling within her,—whether of fear, anger, or pity: he had forced her to the consciousness of his existence. It was true that he had forgotten to inscribe his name upon the papyrus scroll; but what more could the queen have learned from the inscription,—*Meïamoun, Son of Mandouschopsh?* In her eyes the slave or the monarch were equal. A goddess, in choosing a peasant for her lover, stoops no lower than in choosing a patrician or a king: the Immortals from a height so lofty can behold only love in the man of their choice.

The thought which had weighed upon his breast like the knee of a colossus of brass, had at last departed: it had traversed the air; it had even reached the queen herself,—the apex of the triangle,—the inaccessible summit! It had aroused curiosity in that impassive heart—a prodigious advance, truly, toward success!

Meïamoun indeed never suspected that he had so thoroughly succeeded in this wise; but he felt more tranquil,—for he had sworn unto himself by that mystic Bari who guides the souls of the dead to Amenthi, by the sacred birds Bermou and Ghenghen, by Typhon and by Osiris and by all things awful in Egyptian mythology, that he should be the accepted lover of Cleopatra though it were but for a single night,—though for only a single hour,—though it should cost him his life, and even his very soul.

If we must explain how he had fallen so deeply in love with a woman whom he had beheld only from afar off, and to whom he had hardly dared to raise his eyes—even he who was wont to gaze fearlessly into the yellow eyes of the lion,—or how the tiny seed of love, chance-fallen upon his heart, had grown there so rapidly and extended its roots so deeply, we can answer only that it is a mystery which we are unable to explain:—we have already said of Meïamoun,—The Abyss called him.

Once assured that Phrehipephbour had returned with his rowers, he again threw himself into the current and once more swam toward the palace of Cleopatra, whose lamp still shone through the window curtains like a painted star. Never did Leander swim with more courage and vigor toward the tower of Sestos; yet for Meïamoun no Hero was waiting, ready to pour vials of perfume upon his head to dissipate the briny odors of the sea, and banish the sharp kisses of the storm.

A strong blow from some keen lance or *harpe* was certainly the worst he had to fear; and in truth he had but little fear of such things.

He swam close under the walls of the palace which bathed its marble feet in the river's depths, and paused an instant before a submerged archway into which the water rushed downward in eddying whirls. Twice, thrice, he plunged into the vortex unsuccessfully;—at last, with better luck, he found the opening and disappeared.

This archway was the opening to a vaulted canal, which conducted the waters of the Nile into the baths of Cleopatra.

Chapter V

WOVEN SILVER

Cleopatra found no rest until morning, at the hour when wandering dreams reënter the Ivory Gate. Amidst the illusions of sleep she beheld all kinds of lovers swimming rivers and scaling walls in order to come to her; and, through the vague souvenirs of the night before, her dreams appeared fairly riddled with arrows bearing declarations of love. Starting nervously from time to time in her troubled slumbers, she struck her little feet unconsciously against the bosom of Charmion, who lay across the foot of the bed to serve her as a cushion.

When she awoke a merry sunbeam was playing through the window curtain, whose woof it penetrated with a thousand tiny points of light, and thence came familiarly to the bed; flitting like a golden butterfly over her lovely shoulders, which it lightly touched in passing by with a luminous kiss. Happy sunbeam, which the Gods might well have envied!

In a faint voice, like that of a sick child, Cleopatra asked to be lifted out of bed; two of her women raised her in their arms and gently laid her on a tiger skin stretched upon the floor, of which the eyes were formed of carbuncles and the claws of gold. Charmion wrapped her in a *calasiris* of linen whither than milk; confined her hair in a net of woven silver threads; tied to her little feet cork *tatbebs* upon the soles of which were painted in token of contempt two grotesque figures representing two men of the races of Nahasi and Nahmou, bound hand and foot:—so that Cleopatra literally deserved the epithet, "Conculcatrix of Nations" which the royal cartouche-inscriptions bestow upon her.

It was the hour for the bath; Cleopatra went to bathe accompanied by her women.

The baths of Cleopatra were built in the midst of immense gardens filled with mimosas, aloes, carob-trees, citron-trees, and Persian apple-trees, whose luxuriant freshness afforded a delicious contrast to the arid appearance of the neighboring vegetation: there, too, vast terraces uplifted masses of verdant foliage, and enabled flowers to climb almost to the very sky upon gigantic stairways of rose-colored granite;—vases of Pentelic marble bloomed at the end of each step like huge lily-flowers; and the plants they contained seemed only their pistils;—chimeras caressed into form by the chisels of the most skillful Greek sculptors, and less stern of aspect than the Egyptian sphinxes, with their grim mien and moody attitudes, softly extended their limbs upon the flower-strewn turf, like shapely white leverettes upon a drawing-room carpet. These were charming feminine figures,—with finely chiseled nostrils, smooth brows, small mouths, delicately dimpled arms, breasts fair-rounded and daintily formed; wearing earrings, necklaces, and all the trinkets suggested by adorable caprice,—whose bodies terminated in bifurcated fishes' tails, like the women described by Horace, or extended into birds' wings, or rounded into lions' haunches, or blended into volutes of foliage according to the fancies of the artist or in conformity to the architectural position chosen. A double row of these delightful monsters lined the alley which led from the palace to the bathing halls.

At the end of this alley was a huge fountain-basin, approached by four porphyry stairways; through the transparent depths of the diamond-clear water the steps could be seen descending to the bottom of the basin, which was strewn with gold-dust in lieu of sand;—here figures of women terminating in pedestals like Caryatides spirited from their breasts slender jets of perfumed water, which fell into the basin in silvery dew, pitting the clear watery mirror with wrinkle-creating drops. In addition to this task these Caryatides had likewise that of supporting upon their heads an entablature decorated with Nereids and Tritons in bas-relief, and furnished with rings of bronze to which the silken cords of a velarium might be attached. From the portico was visible an extending expanse of freshly humid, bluish-green verdure and cool shade,—a fragment of the Vale of Tempe transported to Egypt. The famous gardens of Semiramis would not have borne comparison with these.

We will not pause to describe the seven or eight other halls of various temperature, with their hot and cold vapors, perfume boxes, cosmetics, oils, pumice stone, gloves of woven horsehair, and all the refinements of the antique balneatory art brought to the highest pitch of voluptuous perfection.

Hither came Cleopatra, leaning with one hand upon the shoulder of Charmion; she had taken at least thirty steps all by herself—mighty effort!—enormous fatigue! A tender tint of rose commenced to suffuse the transparent skin of her cheeks, refreshing their passionate pallor;—a blue network of veins relieved the amber blondness of her temples; her marble forehead—low like the antique foreheads, but full and perfect in form,—united by one faultless line with a straight nose finely chiseled as a cameo, with rosy nostrils which the least emotion made palpitate like the nostrils of an amorous tigress; the lips of her small, rounded mouth, slightly separated from the nose, wore a disdainful curve; but an unbridled voluptuousness,—an indescribable vital warmth,—glowed in the brilliant crimson and humid luster of the under lip. Her eyes were shaded by level eyelids and eyebrows slightly arched and delicately outlined. We cannot attempt by description to convey an idea of their brilliancy; it was a fire, a languor, a sparkling limpidity which might have made even the dog-headed Anubis giddy; every glance of her eyes was in itself a poem richer than aught of Homer or Mimnermus. An imperial chin, replete with force and power to command, worthily completed this charming profile.

She stood erect upon the upper step of the basin, in an attitude full of proud grace; her figure slightly thrown back, and one foot in suspense, like a goddess about to leave her pedestal, whose eyes still linger on heaven: her robe fell in two superb folds from the peaks of her bosom to her feet, in unbroken lines. Had Cleomenes been her contemporary and enjoyed the happiness of beholding her thus, he would have broken his Venus in despair.

Before entering the water, she bade Charmion, for a new caprice, to change her silver hair-net;—she preferred to be crowned with reeds and lotus-flowers, like a water divinity. Charmion obeyed; and her liberated hair fell in black cascades over her shoulders, and shadowed her beautiful cheeks in rich bunches like ripening grapes.

Then the linen tunic, which had been confined only by one golden clasp, glided down over her marble body, and fell in a white cloud at her feet, like the swan at the feet of Ledo. . . .

And Meïamoun, where was he?

O cruel lot, that so many insensible objects should enjoy the favors which would ravish a lover with delight! The wind which toys with a wealth of perfumed hair, or kisses beautiful lips with kisses which it is unable to appreciate; the water which envelopes an adorably beautiful body in one universal kiss, and is yet notwithstanding indifferent to that exquisite pleasure; the mirror which reflects so many charming images; the buskin or *tatbeb* which clasps a divine little foot:—oh, what happiness lost!

Cleopatra dipped her pink heel in the water and descended a few steps: the quivering flood made a silver belt about her waist, and silver bracelets about her arms, and rolled in pearls like a broken necklace over her bosom and shoulders her wealth of hair, lifted by the water, extended behind her like a royal mantle:—even in the bath she was a queen. She swam to and fro, dived and brought up handfuls of gold dust with which she laughingly pelted some of her women:—again, she clung suspended to the balustrade of the basin, concealing or exposing her treasures of loveliness,—now permitting only her lustrous and polished back to be seen,—now showing her whole figure, like Venus Anadyomene, and incessently varying the aspects of her beauty.

Suddenly she uttered a cry as shrill as that of Diana surprised by Actæon: she had seen gleaming through the neighboring foliage a burning eye, yellow and phosphoric as the eye of a crocodile or lion.

It was Meïamoun who, crouching behind a tuft of leaves, and trembling like a fawn in a field of wheat, was intoxicating himself with the dangerous pleasure of beholding the queen in her bath. Though brave even to temerity, the cry of Cleopatra passed through his heart, coldly-piercing as the blade of a sword: a death-like sweat covered his whole body; his arteries hissed through his temples with a sharp sound;—the iron hand of anxious fear had seized him by the throat, and was strangling him.

The eunuchs rushed forward lance in hand: Cleopatra pointed out to them the group of trees, where they found Meïamoun crouching in concealment. Defence was out of the question: he attempted none, and suffered himself to be captured. They prepared to kill him with that cruel and stupid impassibility characteristic of eunuchs; but Cleopatra, who in the interim had covered herself with her calasiris, made no signs to them to stop and bring the prisoner before her.

Meïamoun could only fall upon his knees and stretch forth suppliant hands to her, as to the altars of the gods.

"Are you some assassin bribed by Rome?—or for what purpose have you entered these sacred precincts from which all men are excluded?"—demanded Cleopatra with an imperious gesture of interrogation.

"May my soul be found light in the balance of Amenti, and may Tmeï, daughter of the Sun and goddess of Truth, punish me if I have ever entertained a though of evil against you, O queen!" answered Meïamoun, still upon his knees.

Sincerity and loyalty were written upon his countenance in characters so transparent, that Cleopatra immediately banished her suspicions, and looked upon the young Egyptian with a look less stern and wrathful:—she saw that he was beautiful.

"Then what motive could have prompted you to enter a place where you could only expect to meet death?"

"I love you!" murmured Meïamoun in a low but distinct voice; for his courage had returned, as in every desperate situation when the odds against him could be no worse.

"Ah!" cried Cleopatra, bending toward him, and seizing his arm with a sudden brusque movement,—"so then it was you who shot that arrow with the papyrus scroll!—by Omns, the Dog of Hell, you are a very foolhardy wretch! . . . I now recognize you: I long observed you wandering like a complaining Shade about the places where I dwell. . . . You were at the Procession of Isis,—at the Panegyris of Hermonthis: you followed the royal cangia. Ah!—you must have a queen? . . . You have no mean ambitions; you expect without doubt to be well paid in return! . . . Assuredly I am going to love you! . . . Why not?"

"Queen," returned Meïamoun with a look of deep melancholy, "do not rail! I am mad, it is true; I have deserved death,—that is also true: be humane;—bid them kill me!"

"No: I have taken the whim to be clement to-day: I will give you your life."

"What would you that I should do with life?—I love you!"

"Well, then, you shall be satisfied;—you shall die," answered Cleopatra: "you have indulged yourself in wild and extravagant dreams; in fancy your desires have crossed an impassable threshold:—you imagined yourself to be Cæsar or Mark Antony—you loved the queen! In some moment of delirium you have been able to believe that—under some condition of things which takes place but once in a thousand years,—Cleopatra might some day love you. Well, what you thought impossible is actually about to happen:—I will transform your dream into a reality;—it pleases me, for once, to secure the accomplishment of a mad hope. I am willing to inundate you with glories and splendors and lightnings: I intend that your good fortune shall be dazzling in its brilliancy You were at the bottom of the ladder:—I am about to lift you to the summit, abruptly, suddenly, without a transition. I take you out of nothingness; I make you the equal of a God; and I plunge you back again into nothingness: that is all;—but do not presume to call me cruel or to invoke my pity,—do not weaken when the hour comes. I am good to you: I lend myself to your folly;—I have the right to order you to be killed at once; but since you tell me that you love me I will have you killed to-morrow instead: your life belongs to me for one night. I am generous: I will buy it from you;—I could take it from you. But what are you doing on your knees at my feet! Rise; and give me your arm, that we may return to the palace."

CHAPTER VI

THE ENVENOMED LIQUOR

OUR world of today is puny indeed beside the antique world: our banquets are mean, niggardly, compared with the appalling sumptuousness of the Roman patricians and the princes of ancient Asia;—their ordinary repasts would in these days be regarded as frenzied orgies; and a whole modern city could subsist for eight days upon the leavings of one supper given by Lucullus to a few intimate friends. With our miserable habits, we find it difficult to conceive of those enormous existences, realizing everything vast, strange, and most monstrously impossible that imagination could devise. Our palaces are mere stables in which Caligula would not quarter his horse;—the retinue of our wealthiest constitutional king is as nothing compared with that of a petty satrap, or a Roman proconsul. The radiant suns which once shone upon the earth are forever extinguished in the nothingness of uniformity; above the dark swarm of men no longer tower those Titanic colossi, who bestrode the world in three paces, like the steeds of Homer;—no more towers of Lylacq; no giant Babel scaling the sky with its infinity of spirals; no temples immeasurable; builded with the fragments of quarried mountains; no kingly terraces for which successive ages and generations could each erect but one step, and from whence some dreamfully-reclining prince might gaze on the face of the world as upon a map unfolded; no more of those extravagantly vast cities of cyclopean edifices, inextricably piled upon one another,—with their mighty circumvallations,—their circuses roaring night and day,—their reservoirs filled with ocean-brine and peopled with whales and leviathans,—their colossal stairways,—their super-imposition of terraces,—their tower-summits bathed in clouds,—their giant palaces,—their aqueducts,—their multitude-vomiting gates,—their shadowy necropoli. Alas! henceforth only plaster hives upon chessboard pavements!

One marvels that men did not revolt against such confiscation of all riches and all living forces for the benefit of a few privileged ones; and that such exorbitant fantasies should not have encountered any opposition on their bloody way. It was because those prodigious lives were the realizations by day of the dreams which haunted each man by night,—the personifications of the common ideal which the nations beheld living symbolized under one of those meteroic names that flame inextinguishably through the night of ages. To-day, deprived of such dazzling spectacles of omnipotent will,—of the lofty contemplation of some human mind, whose least wish makes itself visible in actions unparalleled,—in enormities of granite and brass,—the world becomes irredeemably and hopelessly dull: man is no longer represented in the realization of his imperial fancy.

The story which we are writing, and the great name of Cleopatra which appears in it, have prompted us to these reflections,—so ill-sounding, doubtless to modern ears. But the spectacle of the antique world is something so crushingly discouraging, even to those imaginations which deem themselves exhaustless, and those minds which fancy themselves to have conceived the utmost limits of fairy magnificence, that we cannot here forbear recording our regret and lamentation that we were not contemporaries of Sardanapalus,—of Teglathphalazar,—of Cleopatra, queen of Egypt,—or even of Elagabalus, emperor of Rome and priest of the Sun.

It is our task to describe a supreme orgie,—a banquet compared with which the splendors of Belshazzar's feast must pale,—one of Cleopatra's nights! How can we picture forth in this French tongue, so chaste, so icily prudish, that unbounded transport of passions,—that huge and mighty debauch which feared not to mingle the double purple of wine and blood,—those furious outbursts of insatiate pleasure, madly leaping toward the Impossible with all the wild ardor of senses as yet untamed by the long fast of Christianity?

The promised night should well have been a splendid one; for all the joys and pleasures possible in a human lifetime were to be concentrated into the space of a few hours;—it was necessary that the life of Meïamoun should be converted into a powerful elixir, which he could imbibe at a single draught. Cleopatra desired to dazzle her voluntary victim, and plunge him into a whirlpool of dizzy pleasures,—to intoxicate and madden him with the wine of orgie; so that death, though freely accepted, might come invisibly and unawares.

Let us transport our readers to the banquet-hall!

Our existing architecture offers few points for comparison with those vast edifices whose very ruins resemble the crumblings of mountains rather than the remains of buildings. It needed all the exaggeration of the antique life to animate and fill those prodigious palaces, whose halls were too lofty and vast to allow of any ceiling save the sky itself,—a magnificent ceiling, and well worthy of such mighty architecture!

The banquet-hall was of enormous and Babylonian dimensions; the eye could not penetrate its immeasurable depth: monstrous columns—short, thick and solid enough to sustain the pole itself,—heavily expanded their broad-swelling shafts upon socles variegated with hieroglyphics, and sustained upon their bulging capitals gigantic arcades of granite rising by successive tiers, like vast stairways reversed. Between each two pillars a colossal sphinx of basalt, crowned with the *pschent*, bent forward her oblique-eyed face and horned chin, and gazed into the hall with a fixed and mysterious look. The columns of the second tier, receding from the first, were more elegantly formed, and crowned in lieu of capitals with four female heads addorsed, wearing caps of many folds and all the intricacies of the Egyptian headdress: instead of sphinxes bull-headed idols,—impassive spectators of nocturnal frenzy and the furies of orgie,—were seated upon thrones of stone, like patient hosts awaiting the opening of the banquet.

A third story constructed in a yet different style of architecture—with elephants of bronze spouting perfume from their trunks—crowned the edifice: above the sky yawned like a blue gulf; and the curious stars leaned over the frieze.

Prodigious stairways of porphyry, so highly polished that they reflected the human body like a mirror, ascended and descended on every hand, and bound together these huge masses of architecture.

We can only make a very rapid sketch here, in order to convey some idea of this awful structure, proportioned out of all human measurements. It would require the pencil of Martin,—the great painter of enormities passed away; and we can present only a weak pen-picture in lieu of the Apocalyptic depth of his gloomy style: but imagination may supply our deficiencies;—less fortunate than the painter and the musician, we can only present objects and ideas separately in slow succession. We have as yet spoken of the banquet-hall only, without referring to the guests; and yet we have but barely indicated its character. Cleopatra and Meïamoun are waiting for us: we see them drawing near. . . .

Meïamoun was clad in a linen tunic constellated with stars, and a purple mantle, and wore a fillet about his locks, like an Oriental king. Cleopatra was appareled in a robe of pale green, open at either side, and clasped with golden bees: two bracelets of immense pearls gleamed around her naked arms; upon her head glimmered the golden-pointed diadem. Despite the smile on her lips, a slight cloud of preoccupation shadowed her fair forehead; and from time to time her brows became knitted in a feverish manner. What thoughts could trouble the great queen? As for Meïamoun, his face wore the ardent and luminous look of one in ecstasy or vision,—light beamed and radiated from his brow and temples, surrounding his head with a golden nimbus like one of the twelve great gods of Olympus.

A deep, heartfelt joy illumined his every feature: he had embraced his restless-winged chimera; and it had not flown from him;—he had reached the goal of his life. Though he were to live to the age of Nestor or Priam,—though he should behold his veined temples hoary with locks whiter than those of the high priest of Ammon, he could never know another new experience,—never feel another new pleasure. His maddest hopes had been so much more than realized that there was nothing in the world left for him to desire.

Cleopatra seated him beside her upon a throne with golden griffins on either side, and clapped her little hands together. Instantly lines of fire, bands of sparkling light, outlined all the projections of the architecture: the eyes of the sphinxes flamed with phosphoric lightnings;—the bull-headed idols breathed flame;—the elephants, in lieu of perfumed water, spouted aloft bright columns of crimson fire;—arms of bronze, each bearing a torch. started from the walls; and blazing aigrettes bloomed in the sculptured hearts of the lotus-flowers.

Huge blue flames palpitated in tripods of brass; giant candelabras shook their disheveled light in the midst of ardent vapors: everything sparkled, glittered, beamed. Prismatic irises crossed and shattered each other in the air: the facets of the cups, the angles of the marbles and jaspers, the chiseling of the vases,—all caught a sparkle, a gleam, or a flash as of lightning. Radiance streamed in torrents, and leaped from step to step like a cascade over the porphyry stairways; it seemed the reflection of a conflagration on some broad river;—had the Queen of Sheba ascended thither she would have caught up the folds of her robe, and believed herself walking in water, as when she stepped upon the crystal pavements of Solomon. Viewed through that burning haze, the monstrous figures of the colossi, the animals, the hieroglyphics, seemed to become animated and to live with a factitious life; the black marble rams bleated ironically, and clashed their gilded horns; the idols breathed harshly through their panting nostrils.

The orgie was at its height: the dishes of phenicopters' tongues, and the livers of scarus fish; the eels fattened upon human flesh, and cooked in brine; the dishes of peacock's brains; the boars stuffed with living birds;—and all the marvels of the antique banquets were heaped upon the three table-surfaces of the gigantic triclinium. The wines of Crete, of Massicus, and of Falernus foamed up in cratera wreathed with roses, and filled by Asiatic pages whose beautiful flowing hair served the guests to wipe their hands upon. Musicians playing upon the sistrum, the tympanum, the sambuke, and the harp with one-and-twenty strings, filled all the upper galleries, and mingled their harmonies with the tempest of sound that hovered over the feast: even the deep-voiced thunder could not have made itself heard there.

Meïamoun, whose head was lying on Cleopatra's shoulder, felt as though his reason were leaving him: the banquet-hall whirled around him like a vast architectural nightmare;—through the dizzy glare he beheld perspectives and colonnades without end;—new zones of porticos seemed to uprear themselves upon the real fabric, and bury their summits in heights of sky to which Babel never rose. Had he not felt within his hand the soft, cool hand of Cleopatra, he would have believed himself transported into an enchanted world by some witch of Thessaly or Magian of Persia.

Toward the close of the repast, hump-backed dwarfs and mummers engaged in grotesque dances and combats: then young Egyptian and Greek maidens representing the black and white Hours danced with inimitable grace a voluptuous dance after the Ionian manner.

Cleopatra herself arose from her throne, threw aside her royal mantle, replaced her starry diadem with a garland of flowers, attached golden *crotali* to her alabaster hands, and began to dance before Meïamoun, who was ravished with delight. Her beautiful arms, rounded like the handles of an alabaster vase, shook out bunches of sparkling notes; and her *crotali* prattled with ever-increasing volubility. Poised on the pink tips of her little feet, she approached swiftly to grace the forehead of Meïamoun with a kiss:—then she recommenced her wondrous art, and flitted around him; now backward-leaning, with head reversed, eyes half closed, arms lifelessly relaxed, locks uncurled and loose-hanging like a Bacchante of Mount Mænalus; now again, active, animated, laughing, fluttering—more tireless and capricious in her movements than the pilfering bee. Heart-consuming love,—sensual pleasure,—burning passion,—youth inexhaustible and ever-fresh,—the promise of bliss to come: she expressed all! . . .

The modest stars had ceased to contemplate the scene: their golden eyes could not endure such a spectacle; the heaven itself was blotted out; and a dome of flaming vapor covered the hall.

Cleopatra seated herself once more by Meïamoun. Night advanced: the last of the black Hours was about to take flight;—a faint blue glow entered with bewildered aspect into the tumult of ruddy light as moonbeam falls into a furnace;—the upper arcades became suffused with pale azure tints: day was breaking.

Meïamoun took the horn vase which an Ethiopian slave of sinister countenance presented to him, and which contained a poison so violent that it would have caused any other vase to burst asunder. Flinging his whole life to his mistress in one last look, he lifted to his lips the fatal cup in which the envenomed liquor boiled up, hissing.

Cleopatra turned pale, and laid her hand on Meïamoun's arm to stay the act. His courage touched her;—she was about to say,—"Live to love me yet: I desire it! . . ." when the sound of a clarion was heard. Four heralds-at-arms entered the banquet-hall on horseback; they were officers of Mark Antony, and rode but a short distance in advance of their master. Cleopatra silently loosened the arm of Meïamoun. A long ray of sunlight suddenly played upon her forehead, as though trying to replace her absent diadem.

"You see the moment has come: it is daybreak; it is the hour when happy dreams take flight," said Meïamoun. Then he emptied the fatal vessel at a draught; and fell as though struck by lightning. Cleopatra bent her head; and one burning tear,—the only one she had ever shed,—fell into her cup to mingle with the molten pearl.

"By Hercules, my fair queen! I made all speed in vain,—I see I have come too late," cried Mark Antony, entering the banquet-hall,—"the supper is over. But what signifies this corpse upon the pavement?"

"Oh, nothing!" returned Cleopatra with a smile;—"only a poison I was testing with the idea of using it upon myself should Augustus take me prisoner.—My dear lord, will you not please take a seat beside me, and watch those Greek buffoons dance?'

La Morte Amoureuse

Chapter I

A STRANGE STORY

Brother, you ask me if I have ever loved. Yes. My story is a strange and terrible one; and though I am sixty-six years of age, I scarcely dare even now to disturb the ashes of that memory. To you I can refuse nothing; but I should not relate such a tale to any less experienced mind. So strange were the circumstances of my story, that I can scarcely believe myself to have ever actually been a party to them. For more than three years I remained the victim of a most singular and diabolical illusion. Poor country priest though I was, I led every night in a dream—would to God it had been all a dream!—a most worldly life, a damning life, a life of a Sardanapalus. One single look too freely cast upon a woman well-nigh caused me to lose my soul; but finally by the grace of God and the assistance of my patron saint, I succeeded in casting out the evil spirit that possessed me. My daily life was long interwoven with a nocturnal life of a totally different character. By day I was a priest of the Lord, occupied with prayer and sacred things; by night, from the instant that I closed my eyes I became a young nobleman, a fine connoisseur in women, dogs, and horses; gambling, drinking, and blaspheming; and when I awoke at early daybreak, it seemed to me, on the other hand, that I had been sleeping, and had only dreamed that I was a priest. Of this somnambulistic life there now remains to me only the recollection of certain scenes and words which I cannot banish from my memory; but although I never actually left the walls of my presbytery, one would think to hear me speak that I were a man who, weary of all worldly pleasures, had become a religious, seeking to end a tempestuous life in the service of God, rather than an humble seminarist who has grown old in this obscure curacy, situated in the depths of the woods and even isolated from the life of the century.

Yes, I have loved as none in the world ever loved—with an insensate and furious passion—so violent that I am astonished it did not cause my heart to burst asunder. Ah, what nights—what nights!

From my earliest childhood I had felt a vocation to the priesthood, so that all my studies were directed with that idea in view. Up to the age of twenty-four my life had been only a prolonged novitiate. Having completed my course of theology, I successively received all the minor orders, and my superiors judged me worthy, despite my youth, to pass the last awful degree. My ordination was fixed for Easter week.

I had never gone into the world. My world was confined by the walls of the college and the seminary. I knew in a vague sort of a way that there was something called Woman, but I never permitted my thoughts to dwell on such a subject, and I lived in a state of perfect innocence. Twice a year only I saw my infirm and aged mother, and in those visits were comprised my sole relations with the outer world.

I regretted nothing; I felt not the least hesitation at taking the last irrevocable step; I was filled with joy and impatience. Never did a betrothed lover count the slow hours with more feverish ardor; I slept only to dream that I was saying mass; I believed there could be nothing in the world more delightful than to be a priest; I would have refused to be a king or a poet in preference. My ambition could conceive of no loftier aim.

I tell you this in order to show you that what happened to me could not have happened in the natural order of things, and to enable you to understand that I was the victim of an inexplicable fascination.

At last the great day came. I walked to the church with a step so light that I fancied myself sustained in air, or that I had wings upon my shoulders. I believed myself an angel, and wondered at the sombre and thoughtful faces of my companions, for there were several of us. I had passed all the night in prayer, and was in a condition well-nigh bordering on ecstasy. The bishop, a venerable old man, seemed to me God the Father leaning over his Eternity, and I beheld Heaven through the vault of the temple.

You well know the details of that ceremony—the benediction, the communion under both forms, the anointing of the palms of the hands with the Oil of Catechumens, and then the holy sacrifice offered in concert with the bishop.

Ah, truly spake Job when he declared that the imprudent man is one who hath not made a covenant with his eyes! I accidentally lifted my head, which until then I had kept down, and beheld before me, so close that it seemed that I could have touched her—although she was actually a considerable distance from me and on the further side of the sanctuary railing—a young woman of extraordinary beauty, and attired with royal magnificence. It seemed as though scales had suddenly fallen from my eyes. I felt like a blind man who unexpectedly recovers his sight. The bishop, so radiantly glorious but an instant before, suddenly vanished away, the tapers paled upon their golden candlesticks like stars in the dawn, and a vast darkness seemed to fill the whole church. The charming creature appeared in bright relief against the background of that darkness, like some angelic revelation. She seemed herself radiant, and radiating light rather than receiving it.

I lowered my eyelids, firmly resolved not to again open them, that I might not be influenced by external objects, for distraction had gradually taken possession of me until I hardly knew what I was doing.

In another minute, nevertheless, I reopened my eyes, for through my eyelashes I still beheld her, all sparkling with prismatic colors, and surrounded with such a purple penumbra as one beholds in gazing at the sun.

Oh, how beautiful she was! The greatest painters, who followed ideal beauty into heaven itself, and thence brought back to earth the true portrait of the Madonna, never in their delineations even approached that wildly beautiful reality which I saw before me. Neither the verses of the poet nor the palette of the artist could convey any conception of her. She was rather tall, with a form and bearing of a goddess. Her hair, of a soft blonde hue, was parted in the midst and flowed back over her temples in two rivers of rippling gold; she seemed a diademed queen. Her forehead, bluish-white in its transparency, extended its calm breadth above the arches of her eyebrows, which by a strange singularity were almost black, and admirably relieved the effect of sea-green eyes of unsustainable vivacity and brilliancy. What eyes! With a single flash they could have decided a man's destiny. They had a life, a limpidity, an ardor, a humid light which I have never seen in human eyes; they shot forth rays like arrows, which I could distinctly *see* enter my heart. I know not if the fire which illumined them came from heaven or from hell, but assuredly it came from one or the other. That woman was either an angel or a demon, perhaps both. Assuredly she never sprang from the flank of Eve, our common mother. Teeth of the most lustrous pearl gleamed in her ruddy smile, and at every inflection of her lips little dimples appeared in the satiny rose of her adorable cheeks. There was a delicacy and pride in the regal outline of her nostrils bespeaking noble blood. Agate gleams played over the smooth lustrous skin of her half-bare shoulders, and strings of great blonde pearls—almost equal to her neck in beauty of color—descended upon her bosom. From time to time she elevated her head with the undulating grace of a startled serpent or peacock, thereby imparting a quivering motion to the high lace ruff which surrounded it like a silver trellis-work.

She wore a robe of orange-red velvet, and from her wide ermine-lined sleeves there peeped forth patrician hands of infinite delicacy, and so ideally transparent that, like the fingers of Aurora, they permitted the light to shine through them.

All these details I can recollect at this moment as plainly as though they were of yesterday, for notwithstanding I was greatly troubled at the time, nothing escaped me; the faintest touch of shading, the little dark speck at the point of the chin, the imperceptible down at the corners of the lips, the velvety floss upon the brow, the quivering shadows of the eyelashes upon the cheeks—I could notice everything with astonishing lucidity of perception.

And gazing, I felt opening within me gates that had until then remained closed; vents long obstructed became all clear, permitting glimpses of unfamiliar perspectives within; life suddenly made itself visible to me under a totally novel aspect. I felt as though I had just been born into a new world and a new order of things. A frightful anguish commenced to torture my heart as with red-hot pincers. Every successive minute seemed to me at once but a second and yet a century. Meanwhile the ceremony was proceeding, and I shortly found myself transported far from that world of which my newly born desires were furiously besieging the entrance. Nevertheless I answered "Yes" when I wished to say "No," though all within me protested against the violence done to my soul by my tongue. Some occult power seemed to force the words from my throat against my will. Thus it is, perhaps, that so many young girls walk to the altar firmly resolved to refuse in a startling manner the husband imposed upon them, and that yet not one ever fulfils her intention. Thus it is, doubtless, that so many poor novices take the veil, though they have resolved to tear it into shreds at the moment when called upon to utter the vows. One dares not thus cause so great a scandal to all present, nor deceive the expectation of so many people. All those eyes, all those wills seem to weigh down upon you like a cope of lead; and, moreover, measures have been so well taken, everything has been so thoroughly arranged beforehand and after a fashion so evidently irrevocable, that the will yields to the weight of circumstances and utterly breaks down.

As the ceremony proceeded the features of the fair unknown changed their expression. Her look had at first been one of caressing tenderness; it changed to an air of disdain and of mortification, as though at not having been able to make itself understood.

With an effort of will sufficient to have uprooted a mountain, I strove to cry out that I would not be a priest, but I could not speak; my tongue seemed nailed to my palate, and I found it impossible to express my will by the least syllable of negation. Though fully awake, I felt like one under the influence of a nightmare, who vainly strives to shriek out the one word upon which life depends.

She seemed conscious of the martyrdom I was undergoing, and, as though to encourage me, she gave me a look replete with divinest promise. Her eyes were a poem; their every glance was a song.

She said to me:

"If thou wilt be mine, I shall make thee happier than God Himself in His paradise. The angels themselves will be jealous of thee. Tear off that funeral shroud in which thou art about to wrap thyself. I am Beauty, I am Youth, I am Life. Come to me! Together we shall be Love. Can Jehovah offer thee aught in exchange? Our lives will flow on like a dream, in one eternal kiss.

"Fling forth the wine of that chalice, and thou art free. I will conduct thee to the Unknown Isles. Thou shalt sleep in my bosom upon a bed of massy gold under a silver pavilion, for I love thee and would take thee away from thy God, before whom so many noble hearts pour forth floods of love which never reach even the steps of His throne!"

These words seemed to float to my ears in a rhythm of infinite sweetness, for her look was actually sonorous, and the utterances of her eyes were re-echoed in the depths of my heart as though living lips had breathed them into my life. I felt myself willing to renounce God, and yet my tongue mechanically fulfilled all the formalities of the ceremony. The fair one gave me another look, so beseeching, so despairing the keen blades seemed to pierce my heart, and I felt my bosom transfixed by more swords than those of Our Lady of Sorrows.

Chapter II

ROOT IMPERISHABLE

All was consummated: I had become a priest.

Never was deeper anguish painted on human face than upon hers. The maiden who beholds her affianced lover suddenly fall dead at her side, the mother bending over the empty cradle of her child, Eve seated at the threshold of the gate of Paradise, the miser who finds a stone substituted for his stolen treasure, the poet who accidentally permits the only manuscript of his finest work to fall into the fire, could not wear a look so despairing, so inconsolable. All the blood had abandoned her charming face, leaving it whiter than marble; her beautiful arms hung lifelessly on either side of her body as though their muscles had suddenly relaxed, and she sought the support of a pillar, for her yielding limbs almost betrayed her. As for myself, I staggered toward the door of the church, livid as death, my forehead bathed with a sweat bloodier than that of Calvary; I felt as though I were being strangled; the vault seemed to have flattened down upon my shoulders, and it seemed to me that my head alone sustained the whole weight of the dome.

As I was about to cross the threshhold a hand suddenly caught mine—a woman's hand! I had never till then touched the hand of any woman. It was cold as a serpent's skin, and yet its impress remained upon my wrist, burnt there as though branded by a glowing iron. It was she. "Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done?" she exclaimed in a low voice, and immediately disappeared in the crowd.

The aged bishop passed by. He cast a severe and scrutinizing look upon me. My face presented the wildest aspect imaginable; I blushed and turned pale alternately; dazzling lights flashed before my eyes. A companion took pity on me. He seized my arm and led me out. I could not possibly have found my way back to the seminary unassisted. At the corner of a street, while the young priest's attention was momentarily turned in another direction, a negro page, fantastically garbed, approached me, and without pausing on his way slipped into my hand a little pocket-book with gold-embroidered corners, at the same time giving me a sign to hide it. I concealed it in my sleeve, and there kept it until I found myself alone in my cell. Then I opened the clasp. There were only two leaves within, bearing the words, "Clarimonde. At the Concini Palace." So little acquainted was I at that time with the things of this world that I had never heard of Clarimonde, celebrated as she was, and I had no idea as to where the Concini Palace was situated. I hazarded a thousand conjectures, each more extravagant than the last; but, in truth, I cared little whether she were a great lady or a courtesan, so that I could but see her once more.

My love, although the growth of a single hour, had taken imperishable root. I did not even dream of attempting to tear it up, so fully was I convinced such a thing would be impossible. That woman had completely taken possession of me. One look from her had sufficed to change my very nature. She had breathed her will into my life, and I no longer lived in myself, but in her and for her. I gave myself up to a thousand extravagancies. I kissed the place upon my hand which she had touched, and I repeated her name over and over again for hours in succession. I only needed to close my eyes in order to see her distinctly as though she were actually present; and I reiterated to myself the words she had uttered in my ear at the church porch: "Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done?" I comprehended at last the full horror of my situation, and the funereal and awful restraints of the state into which I had just entered became clearly revealed to me. To be a priest!—that is, to be chaste, to never love, to observe no distinction of sex or age, to turn from the sight of all beauty, to put out one's own eyes, to hide forever crouching in the chill shadows of some church or cloister, to visit none but the dying, to watch by unknown corpses, and ever bear about with one the black soutane as a garb of mourning for one's self, so that your very dress might serve as a pall for your coffin.

And I felt life rising within me like a subterranean lake, expanding and overflowing; my blood leaped fiercely through my arteries; my long-restrained youth suddenly burst into active being, like the aloe which blooms but once in a hundred years, and then bursts into blossom with a clap of thunder.

What could I do in order to see Clarimonde once more? I had no pretext to offer for desiring to leave the seminary, not knowing any person in the city. I would not even be able to remain there but a short time, and was only waiting my assignment to the curacy which I must thereafter occupy. I tried to remove the bars of the window; but it was at a fearful height from the ground, and I found that as I had no ladder it would be useless to think of escaping thus. And, furthermore, I could descend thence only by night in any event, and afterward how should I be able to find my way through the inextricable labyrinth of streets? All these difficulties, which to many would have appeared altogether insignificant, were gigantic to me, a poor seminarist who had fallen in love only the day before for the first time, without experience, without money, without attire.

"Ah!" cried I to myself in my blindness, "were I not a priest I could have seen her every day; I might have been her lover, her spouse. Instead of being wrapped in this dismal shroud of mine I would have had garments of silk and velvet, golden chains, a sword, and fair plumes like other handsome young cavaliers. My hair, instead of being dishonored by the tonsure, would flow down upon my neck in waving curls; I would have a fine waxed mustache; I would be a gallant." But one hour passed before an altar, a few hastily articulated words, had forever cut me off from the number of the living, and I had myself sealed down the stone of my own tomb; I had with my own hand bolted the gate of my prison!

I went to the window. The sky was beautifully blue; the trees had donned their spring robes; nature seemed to be making parade of an ironical joy. The *Place* was filled with people, some going, others coming; young beaux and young beauties were sauntering in couples toward the groves and gardens; merry youths passed by, cheerily trolling refrains of drinking songs—it was all a picture of vivacity, life, animation, gayety, which formed a bitter contrast with my mourning and my solitude. On the steps of the gate sat a young mother playing with her child. She kissed its little rosy mouth still impearled with drops of milk, and performed, in order to amuse it, a thousand divine little puerilities such as only mothers know how to invent. The father standing at a little distance smiled gently upon the charming group, and with folded arms seemed to hug his joy to his heart. I could not endure that spectacle. I closed the window with violence, and flung myself on my bed, my heart filled with frightful hate and jealousy, and gnawed my fingers and my bedcovers like a tiger that has passed ten days without food.

I know not how long I remained in this condition, but at last, while writhing on the bed in a fit of spasmodic fury, I suddenly perceived the Abbé Sérapion, who was standing erect in the centre of the room, watching me attentively. Filled with shame of myself, I let my head fall upon my breast and covered my face with my hands.

"Romuald, my friend, something very extraordinary is transpiring within you," observed Sérapion, after a few moments' silence; "your conduct is altogether inexplicable. You—always so quiet, so pious, so gentle—you to rage in your cell like a wild beast! Take heed, brother—do not listen to the suggestions of the devil. The Evil Spirit, furious that you have consecrated yourself forever to the Lord, is prowling around you like a ravening wolf and making a last effort to obtain possession of you. Instead of allowing yourself to be conquered, my dear Romuald, make to yourself a cuirass of prayers, a buckler of mortifications, and combat the enemy like a valiant man; you will then assuredly overcome him. Virtue must be proved by temptation, and gold comes forth purer from the hands of the assayer. Fear not. Never allow yourself to become discouraged. The most watchful and steadfast souls are at moments liable to such temptation. Pray, fast, meditate, and the Evil Spirit will depart from you."

The words of the Abbé Sérapion restored me to myself, and I became a little more calm. "I came," he continued, "to tell you that you have been appointed to the curacy of C——. The priest who had charge of it has just died, and Monseigneur the Bishop has ordered me to have you installed there at once. Be ready, therefore, to start to-morrow." I responded with an inclination of the head, and the Abbé retired. I opened my missal and commenced reading some prayers, but the letters became confused and blurred under my eyes, the thread of the ideas entangled itself hopelessly in my brain, and the volume at last fell from my hands without my being aware of it.

To leave to-morrow without having been able to see her again, to add yet another barrier to the many already interposed between us, to lose forever all hope of being able to meet her, except, indeed, through a miracle! Even to write her, alas! would be impossible, for by whom could I despatch my letter? With my sacred character of priest, to whom could I dare unbosom myself, in whom could I confide? I became a prey to the bitterest anxiety.

Then suddenly recurred to me the words of the Abbé Sérapion regarding the artifices of the devil; and the strange character of the adventure, the supernatural beauty of Clarimonde, the phosphoric light of her eyes, the burning imprint of her hand, the agony into which she had thrown me, the sudden change wrought within me when all my piety vanished in a single instant—these and other things clearly testified to the work of the Evil One, and perhaps that satiny hand was but the glove which concealed his claws. Filled with terror at these fancies, I again picked up the missal which had slipped from my knees and fallen upon the floor, and once more gave myself up to prayer.

Chapter III

SEA-GREEN EYES

Next morning Sérapion came to take me away. Two mules freighted with our miserable valises awaited us at the gate. He mounted one, and I the other as well as I knew how.

As we passed along the streets of the city, I gazed attentively at all the windows and balconies in the hope of seeing Clarimonde, but it was yet early in the morning, and the city had hardly opened its eyes. Mine sought to penetrate the blinds and window-curtains of all the palaces before which we were passing. Sérapion doubtless attributed this curiosity to my admiration of the architecture, for he slackened the pace of his animal in order to give me time to look around me. At last we passed the city gates and commenced to mount the hill beyond. When we arrived at its summit I turned to take a last look at the place where Clarimonde dwelt. The shadow of a great cloud hung over all the city; the contrasting colors of its blue and red roofs were lost in the uniform half-tint, through which here and there floated upward, like white flakes of foam, the smoke of freshly kindled fires. By a singular optical effect one edifice, which surpassed in height all the neighboring buildings that were still dimly veiled by the vapors, towered up, fair and lustrous with the gilding of a solitary beam of sunlight—although actually more than a league away it seemed quite near. The smallest details of its architecture were plainly distinguishable—the turrets, the platforms, the window-casements, and even the swallow-tailed weather-vanes.

"What is that palace I see over there, all lighted up by the sun?" I asked Sérapion. He shaded his eyes with his hand, and having looked in the direction indicated, replied: "It is the ancient palace which the Prince Concini has given to the courtesan Clarimonde. Awful things are done there!"

At that instant, I know not yet whether it was a reality or an illusion, I fancied I saw gliding along the terrace a shapely white figure, which gleamed for a moment in passing and as quickly vanished. It was Clarimonde.

Oh, did she know that at that very hour, all feverish and restless—from the height of the rugged road which separated me from her and which, alas! I could never more descend—I was directing my eyes upon the palace where she dwelt, and which a mocking beam of sunlight seemed to bring nigh to me, as though inviting me to enter therein as its lord? Undoubtedly she must have known it, for her soul was too sympathetically united with mine not to have felt its least emotional thrill, and that subtle sympathy it must have been which prompted her to climb—although clad only in her night-dress—to the summit of the terrace, amid the icy dews of the morning.

The shadow gained the palace, and the scene became to the eye only a motionless ocean of roofs and gables, amid which one mountainous undulation was distinctly visible. Sérapion urged his mule forward, my own at once followed at the same gait, and a sharp angle in the road at last hid the city of S—— forever from my eyes, as I was destined never to return thither. At the close of a weary three-days' journey through dismal country fields, we caught sight of the cock upon the steeple of the church which I was to take charge of, peeping above the trees, and after having followed some winding roads fringed with thatched cottages and little gardens, we found ourselves in front of the façade, which certainly possessed few features of magnificence. A porch ornamented with some mouldings, and two or three pillars rudely hewn from sandstone; a tiled roof with counterforts of the same sandstone as the pillars—that was all. To the left lay the cemetery overgrown with high weeds, and having a great iron cross rising up in its centre; to the right stood the presbytery, under the shadow of the church. It was a house of the most extreme simplicity and frigid cleanliness. We entered the enclosure. A few chickens were picking up some oats scattered upon the ground; accustomed, seemingly, to the black habit of ecclesiastics, they showed no fear of our presence and scarcely troubled themselves to get out of our way. A hoarse, wheezy barking fell upon our ears, and we saw an aged dog running toward us.

It was my predecessor's dog. He had dull bleared eyes, grizzled hair, and every mark of the greatest age to which a dog can possibly attain. I patted him gently, and he proceeded at once to march along beside me with an air of satisfaction unspeakable. A very old woman, who had been the housekeeper of the former curé, also came to meet us, and after having invited me into a little back parlor, asked whether I intended to retain her. I replied that I would take care of her, and the dog, and the chickens, and all the furniture her master had bequeathed her at his death. At this she became fairly transported with joy, and the Abbé Sérapion at once paid her the price which she asked for her little property.

As soon as my installation was over, the Abbé Sérapion returned to the seminary. I was, therefore, left alone, with no one but myself to look to for aid or counsel. The thought of Clarimonde again began to haunt me, and in spite of all my endeavors to banish it, I always found it present in my meditations. One evening while promenading in my little garden along the walks bordered with box-plants, I fancied that I saw through the elm-trees the figure of a woman, who followed my every movement, and that I beheld two sea-green eyes gleaming through the foliage; but it was only an illusion, and on going round to the other side of the garden, I could find nothing except a footprint on the sanded walk—a footprint so small that it seemed to have been made by the foot of a child. The garden was enclosed by very high walls. I searched every nook and corner of it, but could discover no one there. I have never succeeded in fully accounting for this circumstance, which, after all, was nothing compared with the strange things which happened to me afterward.

For a whole year I lived thus, filling all the duties of my calling with the most scrupulous exactitude, praying and fasting, exhorting and lending ghostly aid to the sick, and bestowing alms even to the extent of frequently depriving myself of the very necessaries of life. But I felt a great aridness within me, and the sources of grace seemed closed against me. I never found that happiness which should spring from the fulfilment of a holy mission: my thoughts were far away, and the words of Clarimonde were ever upon my lips like an involuntary refrain. Oh, brother, meditate well on this! Through having but once lifted my eyes to look upon a woman, through one fault apparently so venial, I have for years remained a victim to the most miserable agonies, and the happiness of my life has been destroyed forever.

I will not longer dwell upon those defeats, or on those inward victories invariably followed by yet more terrible falls, but will at once proceed to the facts of my story. One night my doorbell was long and violently rung. The aged housekeeper arose and opened to the stranger, and the figure of a man, whose complexion was deeply bronzed, and who was richly clad in a foreign costume, with a poniard at his girdle, appeared under the rays of Barbara's lantern. Her first impulse was one of terror, but the stranger reassured her, and stated that he desired to see me at once on matters relating to my holy calling. Barbara invited him upstairs, where I was on the point of retiring. The stranger told me that his mistress, a very noble lady, was lying at the point of death, and desired to see a priest. I replied that I was prepared to follow him, took with me the sacred articles necessary for extreme unction, and descended in all haste. Two horses black as the night itself stood without the gate, pawing the ground with impatience, and veiling their chests with long streams of smoky vapor exhaled from their nostrils. He held the stirrup and aided me to mount upon one; then, merely laying his hand upon the pummel of the saddle, he vaulted on the other, pressed the animal's sides with his knees, and loosened rein. The horse bounded forward with the velocity of an arrow. Mine, of which the stranger held the bridle, also started off at a swift gallop, keeping up with his companion. We devoured the road. The ground flowed backward beneath us in a long streaked line of pale gray, and the black silhouettes of the trees seemed fleeing by us on either side like an army in rout. We passed through a forest so profoundly gloomy that I felt my flesh creep in the chill darkness with superstitious fear. The showers of bright sparks which flew from the stony road under the ironshod feet of our horses remained glowing in our wake like a fiery trail; and had any one at that hour of the night beheld us both—my guide and myself—he must have taken us for two spectres riding upon nightmares. Witch-fires ever and anon flitted across the road before us, and the night-birds shrieked fearsomely in the depth of the woods beyond, where we beheld at intervals glow the phosphorescent eyes of wildcats. The manes of the horses became more and more dishevelled, the sweat streamed over their flanks, and their breath came through their nostrils hard and fast. But when he found them slacking pace, the guide reanimated them by uttering a strange, guttural, unearthly cry, and the gallop recommenced with fury. At last the whirlwind race ceased; a huge black mass pierced through with many bright points of light suddenly rose before us, the hoofs of our horses echoed louder upon a great vaulted archway which darkly yawned between two enormous towers. Some great excitement evidently reigned in the castle. Servants with torches were crossing the courtyard in every direction, and above, lights were ascending and descending from landing to landing. I obtained a confused glimpse of vast masses of architecture—columns, arcades, flights of steps, stairways—a royal voluptuousness and elfin magnificence of construction worthy of fairyland. A negro page—the same who had before brought me the tablet from Clarimonde, and whom I instantly recognized—approached to aid me in dismounting, and the major-domo, attired in black velvet with a gold chain about his neck, advanced to meet me, supporting himself upon an ivory cane. Large tears were falling from his eyes and streaming over his cheeks and white beard. "Too late!" he cried, sorrowfully shaking his venerable head. "Too late, sir priest! But if you have not been able to save the soul, come at least and watch by the poor body."

He took my arm and conducted me to the death chamber. I wept not less bitterly than he, for I had learned that the dead one was none other than that Clarimonde whom I had so deeply and so wildly loved. A *prie-dieu* stood at the foot of the bed; a bluish flame flickering in a bonze patera filled all the room with a wan, deceptive light, here and there bringing out in the darkness at intervals some projection of furniture or cornice. In a chiselled urn upon the table there was a faded white rose, whose leaves—excepting one that still held—had all fallen, like odorous tears, to the foot of the vase. A broken black mask, a fan, and disguises of every variety, which were lying on the arm-chairs, bore witness that death had entered suddenly and unannounced into that sumptuous dwelling. Without daring to cast my eyes upon the bed, I knelt down and commenced to repeat the Psalms for the Dead, with exceeding fervor, thanking God that he had placed the tomb between me and the memory of this woman, so that I might thereafter be able to utter her name in my prayers as a name forever sanctified by death. But my fervor gradually weakened, and I fell insensibly into a reverie. That chamber bore no semblance to a chamber of death. In lieu of the fœtid and cadaverous odors which I had been accustomed to breathe during such funereal vigils, a languorous vapor of Oriental perfume—I know not what amorous odor of woman—softly floated through the tepid air. That pale light seemed rather a twilight gloom contrived for voluptuous pleasure than a substitute for the yellow-flickering watch-tapers which shine by the side of corpses. I thought upon the strange destiny which enabled me to meet Clarimonde again at the very moment when she was lost to me forever, and a sigh of regretful anguish escaped from my breast. Then it seemed to me that some one behind me had also sighed, and I turned round to look. It was only an echo. But in that moment my eyes fell upon the bed of death which they had till then avoided. The red damask curtains, decorated with large flowers worked in embroidery, and looped up with gold bullion, permitted me to behold the fair dead, lying at full length, with hands joined upon her bosom. She was covered with a linen wrapping of dazzling whiteness, which formed a strong contrast with the gloomy purple of the hangings, and was of so fine a texture that it concealed nothing of her body's charming form, and allowed the eye to follow those beautiful outlines—undulating like the neck of a swan—which even death had not robbed of their supple grace. She seemed an alabaster statue executed by some skilful sculptor to place upon the tomb of a queen, or rather, perhaps, like a slumbering maiden over whom the silent snow had woven a spotless veil.

I could no longer maintain my constrained attitude of prayer. The air of the alcove intoxicated me, that febrile perfume of half-faded roses penetrated my very brain, and I commenced to pace restlessly up and down the chamber, pausing at each turn before the bier to contemplate the graceful corpse lying beneath the transparency of its shroud. Wild fancies came thronging to my brain. I thought to myself that she might not, perhaps, be really dead; that she might only have feigned death for the purpose of bringing me to her castle, and then declaring her love. At one time I even thought I saw her foot move under the whiteness of the coverings, and slightly disarrange the long, straight folds of the winding-sheet.

And then I asked myself: "Is this indeed Clarimonde? What proof have I that it is she? Might not that black page have passed into the service of some other lady? Surely, I must be going mad to torture and afflict myself thus!" But my heart answered with a fierce throbbing: "It is she; it is she indeed!" I approached the bed again, and fixed my eyes with redoubled attention upon the object of my incertitude. Ah, must I confess it? That exquisite perfection of bodily form, although purified and made sacred by the shadow of death, affected me more voluptuously than it should have done, and that repose so closely resembled slumber that one might well have mistaken it for such. I forgot that I had come there to perform a funeral ceremony; I fancied myself a young bridegroom entering the chamber of the bride, who all modestly hides her fair face, and through coyness seeks to keep herself wholly veiled. Heartbroken with grief, yet wild with hope, shuddering at once with fear and pleasure, I bent over her and grasped the corner of the sheet. I lifted it back, holding my breath all the while through fear of waking her. My arteries throbbed with such violence that I felt them hiss through my temples, and the sweat poured from my forehead in streams, as though I had lifted a mighty slab of marble. There, indeed, lay Clarimonde, even as I had seen her at the church on the day of my ordination. She was not less charming than then. With her, death seemed but a last coquetry. The pallor of her cheeks, the less brilliant carnation of her lips, her long eyelashes lowered and relieving their dark fringe against that white skin, lent her an unspeakably seductive aspect of melancholy chastity and metal suffering; her long loose hair, still intertwined with some little blue flowers, made a shining pillow for her head, and veiled the nudity of her shoulders with its thick ringlets; her beautiful hands, purer, more diaphanous than the Host, were crossed on her bosom in an attitude of pious rest and silent prayer, which served to counteract all that might have proven otherwise too alluring—even after death—in the exquisite roundness and ivory polish of her bare arms from which the pearl bracelets had not yet been removed. I remained long in mute contemplation, and the more I gazed, the less could I persuade myself that life had really abandoned that beautiful body forever. I do not know whether it was an illusion or a reflection of the lamplight, but it seemed to me that the blood was again commencing to circulate under that lifeless pallor, although she remained all motionless. I laid my hand lightly on her arm; it was cold, but not colder than her hand on the day when it touched mine at the portals of the church. I resumed my position, bending my face above her, and bathing her cheeks with the warm dew of my tears. Ah, what bitter feelings of despair and helplessness, what agonies unutterable did I endure in that long watch! Vainly did I wish that I could have gathered all my life into one mass that I might give it all to her, and breathe into her chill remains the flame which devoured me. The night advanced, and feeling the moment of eternal separation approach, I could not deny myself the last sad sweet pleasure of imprinting a kiss upon the dead lips of her who had been my only love. . . . Oh, miracle! A faint breath mingled itself with my breath, and the mouth of Clarimonde responded to the passionate pressure of mine. Her eyes unclosed, and lighted up with something of their former brilliancy; she uttered a long sigh, and uncrossing her arms, passed them around my neck with a look of ineffable delight. "Ah, it is thou, Romuald!" she murmured in a voice languishingly sweet as the last vibrations of a harp. "What ailed thee, dearest? I waited so long for thee that I am dead; but we are now betrothed; I can see thee and visit thee. Adieu, Romuald, adieu! I love thee. That is all I wished to tell thee, and I give thee back the life which thy kiss for a moment recalled. We shall soon meet again."

Her head fell back, but her arms yet encircled me, as though to retain me still. A furious whirlwind suddenly burst in the window, and entered the chamber. The last remaining leaf of the white rose for a moment palpitated at the extremity of the stalk like a butterfly's wing, then it detached itself and flew forth through the open casement, bearing with it the soul of Clarimonde. The lamp was extinguished, and I fell insensible upon the bosom of the beautiful dead.

Chapter IV

A VICTIM

When I came to myself again I was lying on the bed in my little room at the presbytery, and the old dog of the former curé was licking my hand which had been hanging down outside of the covers. Barbara, all trembling with age and anxiety, was busying herself about the room, opening and shutting drawers, and emptying powders into glasses. On seeing me open my eyes, the old woman uttered a cry of joy, the dog yelped and wagged his tail, but I was still so weak that I could not speak a single word or make the slightest motion. Afterward I learned that I had lain thus for three days, giving no evidence of life beyond the faintest respiration. Those three days do not reckon in my life, nor could I ever imagine whither my spirit had departed during those three days; I have no recollection of aught relating to them. Barbara told me that the same copperycomplexioned man who came to seek me on the night of my departure from the presbytery, had brought me back the next morning in a close litter, and departed immediately afterward. When I became able to collect my scattered thoughts, I reviewed within my mind all the circumstances of that fateful night. At first I thought I had been the victim of some magical illusion, but ere long the recollection of other circumstances, real and palpable in themselves, came to forbid that supposition. I could not believe that I had been dreaming, since Barbara as well as myself had seen the strange man with his two black horses, and described with exactness every detail of his figure and apparel. Nevertheless it appeared that none knew of any castle in the neighborhood answering to the description of that in which I had again found Clarimonde.

One morning I found the Abbé Sérapion in my room. Barbara had advised him that I was ill, and he had come with all speed to see me. Although this haste on his part testified to an affectionate interest in me, yet his visit did not cause me the pleasure which it should have done. The Abbé Sérapion had something penetrating and inquisitorial in his gaze which made me feel very ill at ease. His presence filled me with embarrassment and a sense of guilt. At the first glance he divined my interior trouble, and I hated him for his clairvoyance.

While he inquired after my health in hypocritically honeyed accents, he constantly kept his two great yellow lion-eyes fixed upon me, and plunged his look into my soul like a sounding lead. Then he asked me how I directed my parish, if I was happy in it, how I passed the leisure hours allowed me in the intervals of pastoral duty, whether I had become acquainted with many of the inhabitants of the place, what was my favorite reading, and a thousand other such questions. I answered these inquiries as briefly as possible, and he, without ever waiting for my answers, passed rapidly from one subject of query to another. That conversation had evidently no connection with what he actually wished to say. At last, without any premonition, but as though repeating a piece of news which he had recalled on the instant, and feared might otherwise be forgotten subsequently, he suddenly said, in a clear vibrant voice, which rang in my ears like the trumpets of the Last Judgment:

"The great courtesan Clarimonde died a few days ago, at the close of an orgie which lasted eight days and eight nights. It was something infernally splendid. The abominations of the banquets of Belshazzar and Cleopatra were reënacted there. Good God, what age are we living in? The guests were served by swarthy slaves who spoke an unknown tongue, and who seemed to me to be veritable demons. The livery of the very least among them would have served for the gala-dress of an emperor. There have always been very strange stories told of this Clarimonde, and all her lovers came to a violent or miserable end. They used to say that she was a ghoul, a female vampire; but I believe she was none other than Beelzebub himself."

He ceased to speak and commenced to regard me more attentively than ever, as though to observe the effect of his words on me. I could not refrain from starting when I heard him utter the name of Clarimonde, and this news of her death, in addition to the pain it caused me by reason of its coincidence with the nocturnal scenes I had witnessed, filled me with an agony and terror which my face betrayed, despite my utmost endeavors to appear composed. Sérapion fixed an anxious and severe look upon me, and then observed: "My son, I must warn you that you are standing with foot raised upon the brink of an abyss; take heed lest you fall therein. Satan's claws are long, and tombs are not always true to their trust. The tombstone of Clarimonde should be sealed down with a triple seal, for, if report be true, it is not the first time she has died. May God watch over you, Romuald!"

And with these words the Abbé walked slowly to the door. I did not see him again at that time, for he left for S——— almost immediately.

I became completely restored to health and resumed my accustomed duties. The memory of Clarimonde and the words of the old Abbé were constantly in my mind; nevertheless no extraordinary event had occurred to verify the funereal predictions of Sérapion, and I had commenced to believe that his fears and my own terrors were over-exaggerated, when one night I had a strange dream. I had hardly fallen asleep when I heard my bed-curtains drawn apart, as their rings slided back upon the curtain rod with a sharp sound. I rose up quickly upon my elbow, and beheld the shadow of a woman standing erect before me. I recognized Clarimonde immediately. She bore in her hand a little lamp, shaped like those which are placed in tombs, and its light lent her fingers a rosy transparency, which extended itself by lessening degrees even to the opaque and milky whiteness of her bare arm. Her only garment was the linen winding-sheet which had shrouded her when lying upon the bed of death. She sought to gather its folds over her bosom as though ashamed of being so scantily clad, but her little hand was not equal to the task. She was so white that the color of the drapery blended with that of her flesh under the pallid rays of the lamp. Enveloped with this subtle tissue which betrayed all the contours of her body, she seemed rather the marble statue of some fair antique bather than a woman endowed with life. But dead or living, statue or woman, shadow or body, her beauty was still the same, only that the green light of her eyes was less brilliant, and her mouth, once so warmly crimson, was only tinted with a faint tender rosiness, like that of her cheeks. The little blue flowers which I had noticed entwined in her hair were withered and dry, and had lost nearly all their leaves, but this did not prevent her from being charming—so charming that notwithstanding the strange character of the adventure, and the unexplainable manner in which she had entered my room, I felt not even for a moment the least fear.

She placed the lamp on the table and seated herself at the foot of my bed; then bending toward me, she said, in that voice at once silvery clear and yet velvety in its sweet softness, such as I never heard from any lips save hers:

"I have kept thee long in waiting, dear Romuald, and it must have seemed to thee that I had forgotten thee. But I come from afar off, very far off, and from a land whence no other has ever yet returned. There is neither sun nor moon in that land whence I come: all is but space and shadow; there is neither road nor pathway: no earth for the foot, no air for the wing; and nevertheless behold me here, for Love is stronger than Death and must conquer him in the end. Oh what sad faces and fearful things I have seen on my way hither! What difficulty my soul, returned to earth through the power of will alone, has had in finding its body and reinstating itself therein! What terrible efforts I had to make ere I could lift the ponderous slab with which they had covered me! See, the palms of my poor hands are all bruised! Kiss them, sweet love, that they may be healed!" She laid the cold palms of her hands upon my mouth, one after the other. I kissed them, indeed, many times, and she the while watched me with a smile of ineffable affection.

I confess to my shame that I had entirely forgotten the advice of the Abbé Sérapion and the sacred office wherewith I had been invested. I had fallen without resistance, and at the first assault. I had not even made the least effort to repel the tempter. The fresh coolness of Clarimonde's skin penetrated my own, and I felt voluptuous tremors pass over my whole body. Poor child! in spite of all I saw afterward, I can hardly yet believe she was a demon; at least she had no appearance of being such, and never did Satan so skilfully conceal his claws and horns. She had drawn her feet up beneath her, and squatted down on the edge of the couch in an attitude full of negligent coquetry. From time to time she passed her little hand through my hair and twisted it into curls, as though trying how a new style of wearing it would become my face. I abandoned myself to her hands with the most guilty pleasure, while she accompanied her gentle play with the prettiest prattle. The most remarkable fact was that I felt no astonishment whatever at so extraordinary an adventure, and as in dreams one finds no difficulty in accepting the most fantastic events as simple facts, so all these circumstances seemed to me perfectly natural in themselves.

"I loved thee long ere I saw thee, dear Romuald, and sought thee everywhere. Thou wast my dream, and I first saw thee in the church at the fatal moment. I said at once, 'It is he!' I gave thee a look into which I threw all the love I ever had, all the love I now have, all the love I shall ever have for thee—a look that would have damned a cardinal or brought a king to his knees at my feet in view of all his court. Thou remainedst unmoved, preferring thy God to me!

"Ah, how jealous I am of that God whom thou didst love and still lovest more than me!

"Woe is me, unhappy one that I am! I can never have thy heart all to myself, I whom thou didst recall to life with a kiss—dead Clarimonde, who for thy sake bursts asunder the gates of the tomb, and comes to consecrate to thee a life which she has resumed only to make thee happy!"

All her words were accompanied with the most impassioned caresses, which bewildered my sense and my reason to such an extent, that I did not fear to utter a frightful blasphemy for the sake of consoling her, and to declare that I loved her as much as God.

Her eyes rekindled and shone like chrysoprases. "In truth?—in very truth?—as much as God!" she cried, flinging her beautiful arms around me. "Since it is so, thou wilt come with me; thou wilt follow me whithersoever I desire. Thou wilt cast away thy ugly black habit. Thou shalt be the proudest and most envied of cavaliers; thou shalt be my lover! To be the acknowledged lover of Clarimonde, who has refused even a Pope; that will be something to feel proud of! Ah, the fair, unspeakably happy existence, the beautiful golden life we shall live together! And when shall we depart, my fair sir?"

"To-morrow! To-morrow!" I cried in my delirium.

"To-morrow, then, so let it be!" she answered. "In the meanwhile I shall have opportunity to change my toilet, for this is a little too light and in nowise suited for a voyage. I must also forthwith notify all my friends who believe me dead, and mourn for me as deeply as they are capable of doing. The money, the dresses, the carriages—all will be ready. I shall call for thee at this same hour. Adieu, dear heart!" And she lightly touched my forehead with her lips. The lamp went out, the curtains closed again, and all became dark; a leaden, dreamless sleep fell on me and held me unconscious until the morning following.

CHAPTER V

SERAPION'S MATTOCK

I AWOKE later than usual, and the recollection of this singular adventure troubled me during the whole day. I finally persuaded myself that it was a mere vapor of my heated imagination. Nevertheless its sensations had been so vivid that it was difficult to persuade myself that they were not real, and it was not without some presentiment of what was going to happen that I got into bed at last, after having prayed God to drive far from me all thoughts of evil, and to protect the chastity of my slumber.

I soon fell into a deep sleep, and my dream was continued. The curtains again parted, and I beheld Clarimonde, not as on the former occasion, pale in her pale winding-sheet, with the violets of death upon her cheeks, but gay, sprightly, jaunty, in a superb traveling dress of green velvet, trimmed with gold lace, and looped up on either side to allow a glimpse of satin petticoat. Her blonde hair escaped in thick ringlets from beneath a broad black felt hat, decorated with white feathers whimsically twisted into various shapes. In one hand she held a little riding whip terminated by a golden whistle. She tapped me lightly with it, and exclaimed: "Well, my fine sleeper, is this the way you make your preparations? I thought I would find you up and dressed. Arise quickly, we have no time to lose."

I leaped out of bed at once.

"Come, dress yourself, and let us go," she continued, pointing to a little package she had brought with her. "The horses are becoming impatient of delay and champing their bits at the door. We ought to have been by this time at least ten leagues distant from here."

I dressed myself hurriedly, and she handed me the articles of apparel herself one by one, bursting into laughter from time to time at my awkwardness, as she explained to me the use of a garment when I had made a mistake. She hurriedly arranged my hair, and this done, held up before me a little pocket mirror of Venetian crystal, rimmed with silver filigree-work, and playfully asked: "How dost find thyself now? Wilt engage me for thy valet de chambre?"

I was no longer the same person, and I could not even recognize myself. I resembled my former self no more than a finished statue resembles a block of stone. My old face seemed but a coarse daub of the one reflected in the mirror. I was handsome, and my vanity was sensibly tickled by the metamorphosis. That elegant apparel, that richly embroidered vest had made of me a totally different personage, and I marvelled at the power of transformation owned by a few yards of cloth cut after a certain pattern. The spirit of my costume penetrated my very skin, and within ten minutes more I had become something of a coxcomb.

In order to feel more at ease in my new attire, I took several turns up and down the room. Clarimonde watched me with an air of maternal pleasure, and appeared well satisfied with her work. "Come, enough of this child's-play! Let us start, Romuald, dear. We have far to go, and we may not get there in time." She took my hand and led me forth. All the doors opened before her at a touch, and we passed by the dog without awaking him.

At the gate we found Margheritone waiting, the same swarthy groom who had once before been my escort. He held the bridles of three horses, all black like those which bore us to the castle—one for me, one for him, one for Clarimonde. Those horses must have been Spanish genets born of mares fecundated by a zephyr, for they were fleet as the wind itself, and the moon, which had just risen at our departure to light us on the way, rolled over the sky like a wheel detached from her own chariot. We beheld her on the right leaping from tree to tree, and putting herself out of breath in the effort to keep up with us. Soon we came upon a level plain where, hard by a clump of trees, a carriage with four vigorous horses awaited us. We entered it, and the postilions urged their animals into a mad gallop. I had one arm around Clarimonde's waist, and one of her hands clasped in mine; her head leaned upon my shoulder, and I felt her bosom, half bare, lightly pressing against my arm. I had never known such intense happiness. In that hour I had forgotten everything, and I no more remembered having ever been a priest than I remembered what I had been doing in my mother's womb, so great was the fascination which the evil spirit exerted upon me. From that night my nature seemed in some sort to have become halved, and there were two men within me, neither of whom knew the other. At one moment I believed myself a priest who dreamed nightly that he was a gentleman, at another that I was a gentleman who dreamed he was a priest. I could no longer distinguish the dream from the reality, nor could I discover where the reality began or where ended the dream. The exquisite young lord and libertine railed at the priest, the priest loathed the dissolute habits of the young lord. Two spirals entangled and confounded the one with the other, yet never touching, would afford a fair representation of this bicephalic life which I lived. Despite the strange character of my condition, I do not believe that I ever inclined, even for a moment, to madness. I always retained with extreme vividness all the perceptions of my two lives. Only there was one absurd fact which I could not explain to myself—namely, that the consciousness of the same individuality existed in two men so opposite in character. It was an anomaly for which I could not account—whether I believed myself to be the curé of the little village of C——, or *Il Signor Romualdo,* the titled lover of Clarimonde.

Be that as it may, I lived, at least I believed that I lived, in Venice. I have never been able to discover rightly how much of illusion and how much of reality there was in this fantastic adventure. We dwelt in a great palace on the Canaleio, filled with frescoes and statues, and containing two Titians in the noblest style of the great master, which were hung in Clarimonde's chamber. It was a palace well worthy of a king. We had each our gondola, our *barcarolli* in family livery, our music hall, and our special poet. Clarimonde always lived upon a magnificent scale; there was something of

Cleopatra in her nature. As for me, I had the retinue of a prince's son, and I was regarded with as much reverential respect as though I had been of the family of one of the twelve Apostles or the four Evangelists of the Most Serene Republic. I would not have turned aside to allow even the Doge to pass, and I do not believe that since Satan fell from heaven, any creature was ever prouder or more insolent than I. I went to the Ridotto, and played with a luck which seemed absolutely infernal. I received the best of all society—the sons of ruined families, women of the theatre, shrewd knaves, parasites, hectoring swashbucklers. But notwithstanding the dissipation of such a life, I always remained faithful to Clarimonde. I loved her wildly. She would have excited satiety itself, and chained inconstancy. To have Clarimonde was to have twenty mistresses; aye, to possess all women; so mobile, so varied of aspect, so fresh in new charms was she all in herself—a very chameleon of a woman, in sooth. She made you commit with her the infidelity you would have committed with another, by donning to perfection the character, the attraction, the style of beauty of the woman who appeared to please you. She returned my love a hundred-fold, and it was in vain that the young patricians and even the Ancients of the Council of Ten made her the most magnificent proposals. A Foscari even went so far as to offer to espouse her. She rejected all his overtures. Of gold she had enough. She wished no longer for anything but love—a love youthful, pure, evoked by herself, and which should be a first and last passion. I would have been perfectly happy but for a cursed nightmare which recurred every night, and in which I believed myself to be a poor village curé, practicing mortification and penance for my excesses during the day. Reassured by my constant association with her, I never thought further of the strange manner in which I had become acquainted with Clarimonde. But the words of the Abbé Sérapion concerning her recurred often to my memory, and never ceased to cause me uneasiness.

For some time the health of Clarimonde had not been so good as usual; her complexion grew paler day by day. The physicians who were summoned could not comprehend the nature of her malady and knew not how to treat it. They all prescribed some insignificant remedies, and never called a second time. Her paleness, nevertheless, visibly increased, and she became colder and colder, until she seemed almost as white and dead as upon that memorable night in the unknown castle. I grieved with anguish unspeakable to behold her thus slowly perishing; and she, touched by my agony, smiled upon me sweetly and sadly with the fateful smile of those who feel that they must die.

One morning I was seated at her bedside, and breakfasting from a little table placed close at hand, so that I might not be obliged to leave her for a single instant. In the act of cutting some fruit I accidentally inflicted rather a deep gash on my finger. The blood immediately gushed forth in a little purple jet, and a few drops spurted upon Clarimonde. Her eyes flashed, her face suddenly assumed an expression of savage and ferocious joy such as I had never before observed in her.

She leaped out of her bed with animal agility—the agility, as it were, of an ape or a cat—and sprang upon my wound, which she commenced to suck with an air of unutterable pleasure. She swallowed the blood in little mouthfuls, slowly and carefully, like a connoisseur tasting a wine from Xeres or Syracuse. Gradually her eyelids half closed, and the pupils of her green eyes became oblong instead of round. From time to time she paused in order to kiss my hand, then she would recommence to press her lips to the lips of the wound in order to coax forth a few more ruddy drops. When she found that the blood would no longer come, she arose with eyes liquid and brilliant, rosier than a May dawn; her face full and fresh, her hand warm and moist—in fine, more beautiful than ever, and in the most perfect health.

"I shall not die! I shall not die!" she cried, clinging to my neck, half mad with joy. "I can love thee yet for a long time. My life is thine, and all that is of me comes from thee. A few drops of thy rich and noble blood, more precious and more potent than all the elixirs of the earth, have given me back life."

This scene long haunted my memory, and inspired me with strange doubts in regard to Clarimonde; and the same evening, when slumber had transported me to my presbytery, I beheld the Abbé Sérapion, graver and more anxious of aspect than ever. He gazed attentively at me, and sorrowfully exclaimed: "Not content with losing your soul, you now desire also to lose your body. Wretched young man, into how terrible a plight have you fallen!" The tone in which he uttered these words powerfully affected me, but in spite of its vividness even that impression was soon dissipated, and a thousand other cares erased it from my mind. At last one evening, while looking into a mirror whose traitorous position she had not taken into account, I saw Clarimonde in the act of emptying a powder into the cup of spiced wine which she had long been in the habit of preparing after our repasts. I took the cup, feigned to carry it to my lips, and then placed it on the nearest article of furniture as though intending to finish it at my leisure. Taking advantage of a moment when the fair one's back was turned, I threw the contents under the table, after which I retired to my chamber and went to bed, fully resolved not to sleep, but to watch and discover what should come of all this mystery. I did not have to wait long. Clarimonde entered in her night-dress, and having removed her apparel, crept into bed and lay down beside me. When she felt assured that I was asleep, she bared my arm, and drawing a gold pin from her hair, commenced to murmur in a low voice:

"One drop, only one drop! One ruby at the end of my needle. . . . Since thou lovest me yet, I must not die! . . . Ah, poor love! His beautiful blood, so brightly purple, I must drink it. Sleep, my only treasure! Sleep, my god, my child! I will do thee no harm; I will only take of thy life what I must to keep my own from being forever extinguished. But that I love thee so much, I could well resolve to have other lovers whose veins I could drain; but since I have known thee all other men have become hateful to me. . . . Ah, the beautiful arm! How round it is! How white it is! How shall I ever dare to prick this pretty blue vein!" And while thus murmuring to herself she wept, and I felt her tears raining on my arm as she clasped it with her hands. At last she took the resolve, slightly punctured me with her pin, and commenced to suck up the blood which oozed from the place. Although she swallowed only a few drops, the fear of weakening me soon seized her, and she carefully tied a little band around my arm, afterward rubbing the wound with an unguent which immediately cicatrized it.

Further doubts were impossible. The Abbé Sérapion was right. Notwithstanding this positive knowledge, however, I could not cease to love Clarimonde, and I would gladly of my own accord have given her all the blood she required to sustain her factitious life. Moreover, I felt but little fear of her. The woman seemed to plead with me for the vampire, and what I had already heard and seen sufficed to reassure me completely. In those days I had plenteous veins, which would not have been so easily exhausted as at present; and I would not have thought of bargaining for my blood, drop by drop. I would rather have opened myself the veins of my arm and said to her: "Drink, and may my love infiltrate itself throughout thy body together with my blood!" I carefully avoided ever making the least reference to the narcotic drink she had prepared for me, or to the incident of the pin, and we lived in the most perfect harmony.

Yet my priestly scruples commenced to torment me more than ever, and I was at a loss to imagine what new penance I could invent in order to mortify and subdue my flesh. Although these visions were involuntary, and though I did not actually participate in anything relating to them, I could not dare to touch the body of Christ with hands so impure and a mind defiled by such debauches whether real or imaginary. In the effort to avoid falling under the influence of these wearisome hallucinations, I strove to prevent myself from being overcome by sleep. I held my eyelids open with my fingers, and stood for hours together leaning upright against the wall, fighting sleep with all my might; but the dust of drowsiness invariably gathered upon my eyes at last, and finding all resistance useless, I would have to let my arms fall in the extremity of despairing weariness, and the current of slumber would again bear me away to the perfidious shores. Sérapion addressed me with the most vehement exhortations, severely reproaching me for my softness and want of fervor. Finally, one day when I was more wretched than usual, he said to me: "There is but one way by which you can obtain relief from this continual torment, and though it is an extreme measure it must be made use of; violent diseases require violent remedies. I know where Clarimonde is buried. It is necessary that we shall disinter her remains, and that you shall behold in how pitiable a state the object of your love is. Then you will no longer be tempted to lose your soul for the sake of an unclean corpse devoured by worms, and ready to crumble into dust. That will assuredly restore you to yourself." For my part, I was so tired of this double life that I at once consented, desiring to ascertain beyond a doubt whether a priest or a gentleman had been the victim of delusion. I had become fully resolved either to kill one of the two men within me for the benefit of the other, or else to kill both, for so terrible an existence could not last long and be endured. The Abbé Sérapion provided himself with a mattock, a lever, and a lantern, and at midnight we wended our way to the cemetery of ——, the location and place of which were perfectly familiar to him. After having directed the rays of the dark lantern upon the inscriptions of several tombs, we came at last upon a great slab, half concealed by huge weeds and devoured by mosses and parasitic plants, whereupon we deciphered the opening lines of the epitaph:

Here lies Clarimonde
Who was famed in her life-time
As the fairest of women.

"It is here without a doubt," muttered Sérapion, and placing his lantern on the ground, he forced the point of the lever under the edge of the stone and commenced to raise it. The stone yielded, and he proceeded to work with the mattock. Darker and more silent than the night itself, I stood by and watched him do it, while he, bending over his dismal toil, streamed with sweat, panted, and his hard-coming breath seemed to have the harsh tone of a death rattle. It was a weird scene, and had any persons from without beheld us, they would assuredly have taken us rather for profane wretches and shroud-stealers than for priests of God. There was something grim and fierce in Sérapion's zeal which lent him the air of a demon rather than of an apostle or an angel, and his great aquiline face, with all its stern features brought out in strong relief by the lantern-light, had something fearsome in it which enhanced the unpleasant fancy. I felt an icy sweat come out upon my forehead in huge beads, and my hair stood up with a hideous fear. Within the depths of my own heart I felt that the act of the austere Sérapion was an abominable sacrilege; and I could have prayed that a triangle of fire would issue from the entrails of the dark clouds, heavily rolling above us, to reduce him to cinders. The owls which had been nestling in the cypress-trees, startled by the gleam of the lantern, flew against it from time to time, striking their dusty wings against its panes, and uttering plaintive cries of lamentation; wild foxes yelped in the far darkness, and a thousand sinister noises detached themselves from the silence. At last Sérapion's mattock struck the coffin itself, making its planks reëcho with a deep sonorous sound, with that terrible sound nothingness utters when stricken. He wrenched apart and tore up the lid, and I beheld Clarimonde, pallid as a figure of marble, with hands joined; her white winding-sheet made but one fold from her head to her feet. A little crimson drop sparkled like a speck of dew at one corner of her colorless mouth. Sérapion, at this spectacle, burst into fury: "Ah, thou art here, demon! Impure courtesan! Drinker of blood and gold!" And he flung holy water upon the corpse and the coffin, over which he traced the sign of the cross with his sprinkler. Poor Clarimonde had no sooner been touched by the blessed spray than her beautiful body crumbled into dust, and became only a shapeless and frightful mass of cinders and half-calcined bones.

"Behold your mistress, my Lord Romuald!" cried the inexorable priest, as he pointed to these sad remains. "Will you be easily tempted after this to promenade on the Lido or at Fusina with your beauty?" I covered my face with my hands, a vast ruin had taken place within me. I returned to my presbytery, and the noble Lord Romuald, the lover of Clarimonde, separated himself from the poor priest with whom he had kept such strange company so long. But once only, the following night, I saw Clarimonde. She said to me, as she had said the first time at the portals of the church: "Unhappy man! Unhappy man! What hast thou done? Wherefore have hearkened to that imbecile priest? Wert thou not happy? And what harm had I ever done thee that thou shouldst violate my poor tomb, and lay bare the miseries of my nothingness? All communication between our souls and our bodies is henceforth forever broken. Adieu! Thou wilt yet regret me!" She vanished in air as smoke, and I never saw her more.

Alas! she spoke truly indeed. I have regretted her more than once, and I regret her still. My soul's peace has been very dearly bought. The love of God was not too much to replace such a love as hers. And this, brother, is the story of my youth. Never gaze upon a woman, and walk abroad only with eyes ever fixed upon the ground; for however chaste and watchful one may be, the error of a single moment is enough to make one lose eternity.

The Fleece of Gold

Chapter I

TIBURCE

Tiburce was really a most extraordinary young man; his oddity had the peculiar merit of being unaffected; he did not lay it aside on returning home, as he did his hat and gloves; he was original between four walls, without spectators, for himself alone.

Do not conclude, I beg, that Tiburce was ridiculous, that he had one of those aggressive manias which are intolerable to all the world; he did not eat spiders, he played on no instrument, nor did he read poetry to anybody. He was a staid, placid youth, talking little, listening less; and his half-opened eyes seemed to be turned inward.

He passed his life reclining in the corner of a divan, supported on either side by a pile of cushions, worrying as little about the affairs of the time as about what was taking place in the moon. There were very few substantives which had any effect on him, and no one was ever less susceptible to long words. He cared absolutely nothing for his political rights, and thought that the people were still free at the wine-shop.

His ideas on all subjects were very simple; he preferred to do nothing rather than to work; he preferred good wine to cheap wine and a beautiful woman to an ugly one; in natural history he made a classification than which nothing could be more succinct; things that eat, and things that do not eat. In brief, he was absolutely detached from all human affairs, and was as reasonable as he appeared mad.

He had not the slightest self-esteem; he did not deem himself the pivot of creation, and realized fully that the world could turn without his assistance; he thought little more of himself than of the rind of a cheese, or of the eels in vinegar. In face of eternity and the infinite, he had not the courage to be vain; having looked sometimes through the microscope and the telescope, he had not an exaggerated idea of the importance of the human race. His height was five feet, four inches; but he said to himself that the people in the sun might well be eight hundred leagues tall.

Such was our friend Tiburce.

It would be a mistake to think from all this that Tiburce was devoid of passions. Beneath the ashes of that placid exterior smouldered more than one burning brand. However, no one knew of any regular mistress of his, and he displayed little gallantry toward women. Like almost all the young men of today, without being precisely a poet or a painter, he had read many novels and seen many pictures; lazy as he was, he preferred to live on the faith of other people; he loved with the poet's love, he looked with the eyes of the artist, and he was familiar with more poets than faces; reality was repugnant to him, and by dint of living in books and paintings, he had reached the point where nature no longer rang true.

The Madonnas of Raphael, the courtesans of Titian, caused the most celebrated beauties to seem ugly to him; Petrarch's Laura, Dante's Beatrice, Byron's Haidee, André Chénier's Camille, threw completely into the shade the women in hats, gowns, and shoulder-capes whose lover he might have been. And yet he did not demand an ideal with white wings and a halo about her head; but his studies in antique statuary, the Italian schools, his familiarity with the masterpieces of art, and his reading of the poets had given him an exquisitely refined taste in the matter of form, and it would have been impossible for him to love the noblest mind on earth, unless it had the shoulders of the Venus of Milo. So it was that Tiburce was in love with no one.

His devotion to abstract beauty was manifested by the great number of statuettes, plaster casts, drawings and engravings with which his room and its walls were crowded, so that the ordinary *bourgeois* would have considered it rather an impossible abode; for he had no furniture save the divan mentioned above, and several cushions of different colors scattered over the carpet. Having no secrets, he could easily do without a secretary, and the incommodity of commodes was to him an established fact.

Tiburce rarely went into society, not from shyness, but from indifference: he welcomed his friends cordially, and never returned their visits. Was Tiburce happy? No; but he was not unhappy; he would have liked, however, to dress in red. Superficial persons accused him of insensibility, and kept women said that he had no heart; but in reality his was a heart of gold, and his search for physical beauty betrayed to observant eyes a painful disillusionment in the world of moral beauty. In default of sweetness of perfume, he sought grace in the vessel containing it; he did not complain, he indulged in no elegies, he did not wear ruffles *en pleureuse;* but one could see that he had suffered, that he had been deceived, and that he proposed not to love again except with his eyes open. As dissimulation of the body is much more difficult than dissimulation of the mind, he set much store by material perfection; but alas! a lovely body is as rare as a lovely soul. Moreover, Tiburce, depraved by the reflections of novel-writers, living in the charming, imaginary society created by poets, with his eyes full of the masterpieces of statuary and painting, had a lordly and scornful taste; and that which he took for love was simply the adoration of an artist. He found faults of drawing in his mistress; although he did not suspect it, woman was to him a model, nothing more.

One day, having smoked his hookah, having gazed at Correggio's threefold Leda in its filleted frame, having turned Pradine's latest statuette about in every direction, having taken his left foot in his right hand, and his right foot in his left hand, and having placed his heels on the edge of the mantel, Tiburce was forced to admit to himself that he had come to the end of his means of diversion, that he knew not which way to turn, and that the gray spiders of ennui were crawling down the walls of his room, all dusty with drowsiness.

He asked the time, and was told that it was a quarter to one, which seemed to him decisive and unanswerable. He bade his servant dress him and went out to walk the streets; as he walked he reflected that his heart was empty, and he felt the need of "making a passion," as they say in Parisian slang.

This laudable resolution formed, he propounded the following questions to himself: Shall I love a Spaniard with an amber complexion, frowning eyebrows, and jet-black hair? or an Italian with classic features, and orange-tinted eyelids encircling a glance of flame? or a slim-waisted Frenchwoman, with a nose *à la* Roxelane and a doll's foot? or a red Jewess with a sky-blue skin and green eyes? or a negress black as night, and gleaming like new bronze? Shall I have a fair or a dark passion? Terrible perplexity.

As he plodded along, head down, pondering this question, he ran against something hard, which caused him to jump back with a blood-curdling oath. That something was a painter friend of his; together they entered the Museum. The painter, an enthusiastic admirer of Rubens, paused by preference before the canvasses of the Dutch Michelangelo, whom he extolled with a most contagious frenzy of admiration. Tiburce, surfeited with the Greek outline, the Roman contour, the tawny tones of the Italian masters, took delight in the plump forms, the satiny flesh, the ruddy faces, as blooming as bouquets of flowers, the luxuriant health that the Antwerpian artist sends bounding through the veins of those faces of his, with their net-work of blue and scarlet. His eye caressed with sensuous pleasure those lovely pearl-white shoulders and those siren-like hips drowned in waves of golden hair and marine pearls. Tiburce, who had an extraordinary faculty of assimilation, and who understood equally well the most contrasted types, was at that moment as Flemish as if he had been born in the *polders* and had never lost sight of Lillo fort and the steeples of Antwerp.

"It is decided," he said to himself as he left the gallery, "I will love a Fleming."

As Tiburce was the most logical person in the world, he placed before himself this irrefutable argument, namely, that Flemish women must be more numerous in Flanders than elsewhere, and that it was important for him to go to Belgium at once—*to hunt the blonde.* This Jason of a new type, in quest of another fleece of gold, took the Brussels diligence that same evening, with the mad haste of a bankrupt weary of intercourse with men and feeling a craving to leave France, that classic home of the fine arts, of lovely women, and of sheriffs' officers.

After a few hours, Tiburce, not without a thrill of joy, saw the Belgian lion appear on the signs of inns, beneath a poodle in nankeen breeches, accompanied by the inevitable *Verkoopt men dranken.* On the following evening he walked on Magdalena Strass in Brussels, climbed the mountain with its kitchen gardens, admired the stained-glass windows of St. Gudule's and the belfry of the Hotel de Ville, and scrutinized, not without alarm, all the women who passed.

He met an incalculable number of negresses, mulattresses, quadroons, half-breeds, griffs, yellow women, copper-colored women, green women, women of the color of a boot-flap, but not a single blonde; if it had been a little warmer he might have imagined himself at Seville; nothing was lacking, not even the black mantilla.

As he returned to his hotel on Rue d'Or, however, he saw a girl who was only a dark chestnut, but she was ugly. The next day, he saw near the *residenz* of Laeken, an Englishwoman with carroty-red hair and light-green shoes; but she was as thin as a frog that has been shut up in a bottle for six months, to act as a barometer, which rendered her inapt to realize an ideal after the style of Rubens.

Finding that Brussels was peopled solely by Andalusians with *burnished breasts*—which fact is readily explained by the Spanish domination that held the Low Countries in subjection so long—Tiburce determined to go to Antwerp, thinking, with some appearance of reason, that the types familiar to Rubens and so constantly reproduced on his canvases were likely to be frequently met with in his beloved native city.

He betook himself, therefore, to the station of the railway that runs from Brussels to Antwerp. The steam horse had already eaten his ration of coal; he was snorting impatiently and blowing from his inflamed nostrils, with a strident noise, dense puffs of white smoke, mingled with showers of sparks

Tiburce seated himself in his compartment, in company with five Walloons, who sat as motionless in their places as canons in the chapter-house, and the train started. The pace was moderate at first; they moved little faster than one rides in a postchaise at ten francs the relay; but soon the beast became excited and was seized with a most extraordinary rage for rapidity. The poplars beside the track fled to right and left like a routed army; the landscape became blurred and was blotted out in a gray vapor; the colewort and the peony studded the black strips of ground with indistinct stars of gold and azure. Here and there a slender spire appeared amid the billowing clouds and disappeared instantly, like the mast of a ship on a stormy sea. Tiny light-pink or apple-green wine-shops made a fleeting impression on the eye at the rear of their gardens, beneath their garlands of vines or hops; here and there pools of water, encircled by dark mud, dazzled the eye like the mirror in a trap for larks. Meanwhile the iron monster belched forth with an ever-increasing roar its breath of boiling steam; it puffed like an asthmatic whale; a fiery sweat bathed its brazen sides. It seemed to complain of the insensate swiftness of its pace and to pray for mercy to its begrimed postillions, who spurred it on incessantly with shovelfuls of coal. There came a noise of bumping carriages and rattling chains: they had arrived.

Tiburce ran to right and left without fixed purpose, like a rabbit suddenly released from its cage. He took the first street that he saw, then a second, then a third, and plunged bravely into the heart of the ancient city, seeking the blonde with an ardor worthy of the knights-errant of old.

He saw a vast number of houses painted mouse-gray, canary-yellow, sea-green, pale lilac; with roofs like stairways, moulded gables, doors with vermiculated bosses, with short stout pillars, decorated with quadrangular bracelets like those at the Luxembourg, leaded Renaissance windows, gargoyles, carved beams, and a thousand curious architectural details, which would have enchanted him on any other occasion; he barely glanced at the illuminated Madonnas, at the Christs bearing lanterns at the street corners, at the saints of wax or wood with their gewgaws and tinsel—all those Catholic emblems that have so strange a look to an inhabitant of one of our Voltairean cities. Another thought absorbed him: his eyes sought, through the dark, smoke-begrimed windows, some fair-haired feminine apparition, a tranquil and kindly Brabantine face, with the ruddy freshness of the peach, and smiling within its halo of golden hair. He saw only old women making lace, reading prayer-books, or squatting in corners and watching for the passing of an infrequent pedestrian, reflected by the glass of their *espions*, or by the ball of polished steel hanging in the doorway.

The streets were deserted, and more silent than those of Venice; no sound was to be heard save that of the chimes of various churches striking the hours in every possible key, for at least twenty minutes. The pavements, surrounded by a fringe of weeds, like those in the courtyards of unoccupied houses, told of the infrequency and small number of the passersby. Skimming the ground like stealthy swallows.

a few women, wrapped discreetly in the folds of their dark hoods, glided noiselessly along the houses, sometimes followed by a small boy carrying their dog. Tiburce quickened his pace, in order to catch a glimpse of the features buried beneath the shadow of the hood, and saw there pale faces, with compressed lips, eyes surrounded by dark circles, prudent chins, delicate and circumspect noses—the genuine type of the pious Roman or the Spanish duenna; his burning glance was shattered against dead glances, the glassy stare of a dead fish.

From square to square, from street to street, Tiburce arrived at last at the Quay of the Scheldt by the Harbor Gate. The magnificent spectacle extorted a cry of surprise from him; an endless number of masts, yards, and cordage resembled a forest on the river, stripped of leaves and reduced to the state of a mere skeleton. The bowsprits and lateen yards rested familiarly on the parapet of the wharf, as a horse rests his head on the neck of his carriage-mate. There were Dutch *orques,* round-sterned, with their red sails; sharp, black American brigs, with cordage as fine as silk thread; salmon-colored Norwegian koffs, emitting a penetrating odor of planed fir; barges, fishermen, Breton salt-vessels, English coalers, ships from all parts of the world. An indescribable odor of sour herring, tobacco, rancid suet, melted tar, heightened by the acrid smells of the ships from Batavia, loaded with pepper, cinnamon, ginger and cochineal, floated about in the air in dense puffs, like the smoke from an enormous perfume-pan lighted in honor of commerce.

Tiburce, hoping to find the true Flemish type among the lower classes entered the taverns and gin-shops. He drank lambick, white beer of Louvain, ale, porter, and whisky, desiring to improve the opportunity to make the acquaintance of the northern Bacchus. He also smoked cigars of several brands, ate salmon, sauerkraut, yellow potatoes, rare roast-beef, and partook of all the delights of the country.

While he was dining, German women, chubby-faced, swarthy as gypsies, with short skirts and Alsatian caps, came to his table and squalled unmelodiously some dismal ballad, accompanying themselves on the violin and other unpleasant instruments. Blonde Germany, as if to mock at Tiburce, had besmeared itself with the deepest shade of sunburn; he tossed them angrily a handful of small coins, which procured him the favor of another ballad of gratitude, shriller and more uncivilized than the first.

In the evening he went to the music-halls to see the sailors dance with their mistresses; all of the latter had beautiful glossy black hair that shone like a crow's wing. A very pretty Creole seated herself beside him and familiarly touched her lips to his glass, according to the custom of the country, and tried to enter into conversation with him in excellent Spanish, for she was from Havana; she had such velvety-black eyes, a pale complexion, so warm and golden, such a small foot, and such a slender figure, that Tiburce, exasperated, sent her to all the devils, to the great surprise of the poor creature, who was little accustomed to such a greeting.

Utterly insensible to the dark perfections of the dancers, Tiburce withdrew to the Arms of Brabant Hotel. He undressed in a dissatisfied frame of mind, and wrapping himself as well as he could in the openwork napkins which take the place of sheets in Flanders, he soon slept the sleep of the just.

He had the loveliest dreams imaginable.

The nymphs and allegorical figures of the Medici Galley, in the most enticing *déshabillé,* paid him a nocturnal visit; they gazed fondly at him with their great blue eyes, and smiled at him in the most friendly way, with their lips blooming like red flowers amid the milky whiteness of their round, plump faces. One of them, the Nereid in the picture called *The Queen's Voyage,* carried familiarity so far as to pass her pretty taper fingers, tinged with carmine, through the hair of the love-lorn sleeper. Drapery of flowered brocade cleverly concealed the deformity of her scaly legs, ending in a forked tail; her fair hair was adorned with seaweed and coral, as befits a daughter of the sea; she was adorable in that guise. Groups of chubby children, as red as roses, swam about in a luminous atmosphere, holding aloft wreaths of flowers of insupportable brilliancy, and drew down from heaven a perfumed rain. At a sign from the Nereid, the nymphs stood in two rows and tied together the ends of their long auburn hair, in such wise as to form a sort of hammock of gold filigree for the fortunate Tiburce and his finny mistress; they took their places therein, and the nymphs swung them to and fro, moving their heads slightly with a rhythm of infinite sweetness.

Suddenly there was a sharp noise, the golden threads broke, and Tiburce fell to the ground. He opened his eyes and saw naught save a horrible bronze-colored face, which fastened upon him two great enamel eyes, only the whites of which could be seen.

"Your breakfast, *mein Herr,*" said an old Hottentot negress, a servant of the hotel, placing on a small table a salver laden with dishes and silverware.

"Damnation! I ought to have gone to Africa to look for blondes!" grumbled Tiburce, as he attacked his beefsteak in desperation.

Chapter II

CHESTNUT HAIR

Tiburce, having duly satisfied his appetite, left the Arms of Brabant with the laudable and conscientious purpose of continuing the search for his ideal. He was no more fortunate than on the previous day; dark-skinned ironies, emerging from every street, cast sly and mocking glances at him; India, Africa, America, passed before him in specimens more or less copper-colored; one would have said that the venerable city, advised of his purpose, concealed in a spirit of mockery, in the depths of its most impenetrable back yards and behind its dingiest windows, all those of its daughters who might have recalled, vividly or remotely, the paintings of Jordaems or Rubens; stingy with its gold it was lavish with its ebony.

Enraged by this sort of mute ridicule, Tiburce visited the museums and galleries, to escape it. The Flemish Olympus shone once more before his eyes. Once more cascades of hair glistened in tiny reddish waves, with a quiver of gold and radiance; the shoulders of the allegories, refurbishing their silvery whiteness, glowed more vividly than ever; the blue of the eyes became lighter, the ruddy cheeks bloomed like bunches of carnations; a pink vapor infused warmth into the bluish pallor of the knees, elbows, and fingers of all those fair-haired goddesses; soft gleams of changing light, ruddy reflections, played over the plump, rounded flesh; the pigeon-breast draperies swelled before the breath of an invisible wind, and began to flutter about in the azure vapor; the fresh, plump Netherlandish poesy was revealed in all its entirety to our enthusiastic traveler.

But these beauties on canvas were not enough for him. He had come thither in search of real, living types. He had fed long enough on written and painted poetry, and he had discovered that intercourse with abstractions was somewhat unsubstantial. Doubtless it would have been much simpler to stay in Paris and fall in love with a pretty woman, or even with an ugly one, like everybody else; but Tiburce did not understand nature and was able to read it only in translations. He grasped admirably all the types realized in the works of the masters, but he would not have noticed them of his own motion if he had met them on the street or in society; in a word, if he had been a painter, he would have made vignettes based on the verses of poets; if he had been a poet, he would have written verses based on the pictures of painters. Art had taken possession of him when he was too young and had corrupted him and prejudiced him. Such instances are more common than is supposed in our over-refined civilization, where we come in contact with the works of man more often than with those of nature.

For a moment Tiburce had an idea of compromising with himself, and made this cowardly and ill-sounding remark: "Chestnut-hair is a very pretty color." He even went so far, the sycophant, the villain, the man of little faith, as to admit to himself that black eyes were very bright and very attractive. It may be said, to excuse him, that he had scoured in every direction, and without the slightest result, a city which everything justified him in believing to be radically blonde. A little discouragement was quite pardonable.

At the moment that he uttered this blasphemy under his breath, a lovely blue glance, wrapped in a mantilla, flashed before him and disappeared like a will-o'-the-wisp around the corner of Meïr Square.

Tiburce quickened his pace, but he saw nothing more; the street was deserted from end to end. Evidently the flying vision had entered one of the neighboring houses, or had vanished in some unknown alley. Tiburce, bitterly disappointed, after glancing at the well, with the iron scrollwork forged by Quintin Metzys, the painter-locksmith, took it into his head to visit the cathedral, which he found daubed from top to bottom with a horrible canary-yellow. Luckily the wooden pulpit, carved by Verbruggen, with its decorations of foliage alive with birds, squirrels, and turkeys displaying their plumage, and all the zoological equipage which surrounded Adam and Eve in the terrestrial paradise, redeemed that general insipidity by the delicacy of its angles and its nicety of detail. Luckily, the blazonry of the noble families, and the pictures of Otto Venius, of Rubens, and of Van Dyck, partly concealed that hateful color, so dear to the middle classes and to the clergy.

A number of Beguins at prayer were scattered about on the pavement of the church; but the fervor of their piety caused them to bend their faces so low over their red-edged prayer-books, that it was difficult to distinguish their features. Moreover, the sanctity of the spot and the venerable aspect of their costumes prevented Tiburce from feeling inclined to carry his investigation farther.

Five or six Englishmen, breathless after ascending and descending the four hundred and seventy stairs of the steeple to which the dove's-nests with which it is always capped give the aspect of an Alpine peak, were examining the pictures and, trusting only in part to their guide's loquacious learning, were hunting up in their guide-books the names of the masters, for fear of admiring one thing for another; and they repeated in front of every canvas, with imperturbable stolidity: "It is a very fine exhibition." These Englishmen had squarely-cut faces, and the enormous distance between their noses and their chins demonstrated the purity of the breed. As for the English lady who was with them, she was the same one whom Tiburce had previously seen at the *residenz* of Laeken; she wore the same green boots and the same red hair. Tiburce, despairing of finding Flemish blondes, was almost on the point of darting a killing glance at her; but the vaudeville couplets aimed at perfidious Albion came to his mind most opportunely.

In honor of these visitors, so manifestly Britannic, who could not move without a jingling of guineas, the beadle opened the shutters which, during three-fourths of the year, concealed the two wonderful paintings of the *Crucifixion* and the *Descent from the Cross.*

The *Crucifixion* is a work that stands by itself, and Rubens, when he painted it, was thinking of Michelangelo. The drawing is rough, savage, impetuous, like those of the Roman school; all the muscles stand out at once, all the bones and sinews are visible, nerves of steel are surrounded by flesh like granite Here is no trace of the joyous, ruddy tones with which the Antwerpian artist nonchalantly sprinkles his innumerable productions; it is the Italian bistre in its tawniest intensity; executioners, colossi shaped like elephants, have tigers' muzzles and attitudes of bestial ferocity; even the Christ Himself, included in this exaggeration, wears rather the aspect of a Milo of Crotona, nailed to a wooden horse by rival athletes, than of a God voluntarily sacrificing Himself for the redemption of humanity. There is nothing Flemish in the picture save the great Snyders dog barking in a corner.

When the shutters of the *Descent from the Cross* were thrown open, Tiburce was dazzled and seized with vertigo as if he had looked into an abyss of blinding light; the sublime head of the Magdalen blazed triumphantly in an ocean of gold, and seemed to illuminate with the beams from its eyes the pale, gray atmosphere that filtered through the narrow Gothic windows. Everything about him faded away: there was an absolute void; the square-jawed Englishman, the red-haired English woman, the violet-robed beadle—he saw them no more.

The sight of that face was to Tiburce a revelation from on high; scales fell from his eyes, he found himself face to face with his secret dream, with his unavowed hope; the intangible image which he had pursued with all the ardor of an amorous imagination, and of which he had been able to espy only the profile or the ravishing fold of a dress; the capricious and untamed chimera, always ready to unfold its restless wings, was there before him, fleeing no more, motionless in the splendor of its beauty. The great master had copied in his own heart the anticipated and longed-for mistress; it seemed to him that he himself had painted the picture; the hand of genius had drawn unerringly and with broad strokes of the brush what was only confusedly sketched in his mind, and had garbed in gorgeous colors his undefined fancy for the unknown. He recognized that race, and yet he had never seen it.

He stood there, mute, absorbed, as insensible as a man in a cataleptic fit, not moving an eyelid and plunging his eyes into the boundless glance of the great penitent.

A foot of the Christ, white with a bloodless whiteness, as pure and lifeless as a consecrated wafer, hovered with all the inert listlessness of death over the saint's white shoulder, an ivory footstool placed there by the sublime artist to enable the divine corpse to descend from the tree of redemption. Tiburce felt jealous of the Christ. For such a blessed privilege he would gladly have endured the Passion. The bluish pallor of the flesh hardly reassured him. He was deeply wounded, too, because the Magdalen did not turn towards him her melting, glistening eye, wherein the light bestowed its diamonds and grief its pearls. The dolorous and impassioned persistence of that glance, which wrapped the beloved body in a winding-sheet of love, seemed to him humiliating, and eminently unjust to him, Tiburce. He would have rejoiced if the most imperceptible gesture had given him to understand that she was touched by his love; he had already forgotten that he was standing before a painting, so quick is passion to attribute its own ardor even to objects incapable of feeling it. Pygmalion must have been astonished, as if it were a most extraordinary thing, that his statue did not return caress for caress; Tiburce was no less shocked by the coldness of his painted sweetheart.

Kneeling in her robe of green satin, with its ample and swelling folds, she continued to gaze upon the Christ with an expression of grief-stricken concupiscence, like a mistress who seeks to surfeit herself with the features of an adored face which she is never to see again; her hair fell over her shoulders, a luminous fringe; a sunbeam, straying in by chance, heightened the warm whiteness of her linen and of her arms of gilded marble; in the wavering light her breast seemed to swell and throb with an appearance of life; the tears in her eyes melted, and flowed like human tears.

Tiburce thought that she was about to rise and step down from the picture.

Suddenly there was darkness: the vision vanished.

The English visitors had withdrawn, after observing: "Very well; a pretty picture"; and the beadle, annoyed by

Tiburce's prolonged contemplation, had closed the shutters, and was demanding the usual fee. Tiburce gave him all that he had in his pocket; lovers are generous to duennas; the Antwerpian beadle was the Magdalen's duenna, and Tiburce, already looking forward to another interview, was interested in obtaining his favorable consideration.

The colossal St. Christopher, and the hermit carrying a lantern, painted on the exterior of the shutters, albeit very remarkable works, were far from consoling Tiburce for the closing of that dazzling tabernacle, whence the genius of Rubens sparkles like a monstrance laden with precious stones.

He left the church, carrying in his heart the barbed arrow of an impossible love; he had at last fallen in with the passion that he sought, but he was punished where he had sinned: he had become too fond of painting, he was doomed to love a picture. Nature, neglected for art, revenged herself in barbarous fashion; the most timid lover in the presence of the most virtuous of women, always retains a secret hope in a corner of his heart; as for Tiburce, he was sure of his mistress's resistance and he was perfectly well aware that he would never be happy; so that his passion was a genuine passion, a wild, insensate passion, capable of anything; it was especially remarkable for its disinterestedness.

Do not make too merry over Tiburce's love; how many men do we see deeply enamored of women whom they have never seen except in a box at the theater, to whom they have never spoken, and even the sound of whose voice they do not know! Are such men much more reasonable than our hero, and are their impalpable idols to be compared with the Magdalen at Antwerp?

Tiburce walked the streets with a proud and mysterious air, like a gallant returning from a first assignation. The intensity of his sensations surprised him agreeably—he who had never lived except in the brain felt the beating of his heart. It was a novel sensation; and so he abandoned himself without reserve to the charms of that unfamiliar impression; a real woman would not have touched him so deeply. An artificial man can be moved only by an artificial thing; there is a harmony between them; the true would create a discord. As we have said, Tiburce had read much, seen much, thought much, and felt very little; his fancies were simply brain fancies; in him passion rarely went below the cravat. But this time he was really in love, just like a student of rhetoric; the dazzling image of the Magdalen floated before his eyes in luminous spots, as if he had been looking at the sun; the slightest fold, the most imperceptible detail stood out clearly in his memory; the picture was always present before him. He tried in all seriousness to devise some means to impart life to that insensible beauty and to induce her to come forth from her frame; he thought of Prometheus, who kindled the fire of heaven in order to give a soul to his lifeless work; of Pygmalion, who succeeded in finding a way to move and warm a block of marble; he had an idea of plunging into the bottomless ocean of the occult sciences, in order to discover a charm sufficiently powerful to give life and substance to that vain appearance.

He raved, he was mad: he was in love, you see.

Have you not yourself, without reaching that pitch of excitement, been invaded by a feeling of indescribable melancholy in a gallery of old masters, while thinking of the vanished beauties represented by their pictures? Would not one be glad to infuse life into all those pale and silent faces which seem to muse sadly against the greenish ultra-marine or the coal-black which forms the background? Those eyes, whose vital spark gleams more brightly beneath the veil of age, were copied from those of a young princess or a lovely courtesan, of whom naught remains, not even a single grain of dust; those lips, half parted in a painted smile, recall real smiles forever fled. What a pity, in truth, that the women of Raphael, of Correggio, and of Titian are but impalpable shades! And why have not the models, like their portraits, received the privilege of immortality? The harem of the most voluptuous sultan would be a small matter compared with that which one might form with the odalisques of painting, and it is really to be regretted that so much beauty is lost.

Tiburce went every day to the cathedral, and lost himself in contemplation of his beloved Magdalen; and he returned to the hotel each evening, more in love, more depressed, and more insane than ever. More than one noble heart, even without caring for pictures, has known the sufferings of our friend, when trying to breathe his soul into some lifeless idol, who had only the outward phantom of life, and realized the passion she inspired no more than a colored figure.

With the aid of powerful glasses our lover scrutinized his inamorata even in the most imperceptible details. He admired the fineness of the flesh, the solidity and suppleness of the coloring, the energy of the brush, the vigor of the drawings, as another would admire the velvety softness of the skin, the whiteness and the beautiful coloring of a living mistress. On the pretext of examining the work at closer range, he obtained a ladder from his friend, the beadle, and, all aquiver with love, he dared to rest a presumptuous hand on the Magdalen's shoulder. He was greatly surprised to feel, instead of the satin-like softness of a woman's flesh, a hard, rough surface like a file, with hollows and ridges everywhere, due to the impetuosity of the impulsive painter's brush. This discovery greatly depressed Tiburce, but, as soon as he had descended to the floor again, his illusion returned.

He passed more than a fortnight thus, in a state of transcendental enthusiasm, wildly stretching out his arms to his chimera, imploring Heaven to perform a miracle. In his lucid moments he resigned himself to the alternative of seeking throughout the city some type approaching his ideal; but his search resulted in nothing, for one does not find readily on streets and public promenades such a diamond of beauty.

One evening, however, he met again, at the corner of Meïr Square, the charming blue glance we have previously mentioned; this time the vision disappeared less quickly, and Tiburce had time to see a lovely face framed by rich clusters of fair hair, and an artless smile playing about the freshest lips in the world. She quickened her pace when she realized that she was followed, but Tiburce, keeping at a distance, saw her stop in front of a respectable old Flemish house, of poor but decent aspect. As there was some delay in admitting her, she turned for an instant, doubtless in obedience to a vague instinct of feminine coquetry, to see if the stranger had been discouraged by the long walk she had compelled him to take. Tiburce as if enlightened by a sudden gleam of light, saw that she bore a striking resemblance to—the Magdalen.

Chapter III

RESEMBLANCE

The house which the slender figure had entered had an air of Flemish simplicity altogether patriarchal. It was painted a faded rose-color, with narrow white lines to represent the joints of the stones. The gable, denticulated like the steps of a staircase; the roof with its round windows surrounded by scroll-work; the impost, representing, with Gothic artlessness, the story of Noah derided by his sons; the stork's nest, and the pigeons making their toilet in the sun, made it a perfect example of its type; you would have said that it was one of those factories so common in the pictures of Van der Heyden and of Teniers.

A few stalks of hops softened with their playful greenery the too severe and too methodical aspect of the house as a whole. The lower windows were provided with round bars, and over the two lower panes were squares of muslin embroidered with great bunches of flowers after the Brussels fashion; in the space left empty by the swelling of the iron bars were china pots containing a few pale carnations of sickly aspect, despite the evident care the owner took of them, for their drooping heads were supported by playing-cards and a complicated system of tiny scaffolding of twigs of osier. Tiburce observed this detail, which indicated a chaste and restrained life, a whole poem of youth and beauty.

As, after two hours of waiting, he had not seen the fair Magdalen with the blue eyes come forth, he sagely concluded that she must live there; which was true. All that he had left to do was to learn her name, her position in society, to become acquainted with her, and to win her love; mere trifles, in very truth. A professional Lovelace would not have been delayed five minutes; but honest Tiburce was not a Lovelace; on the contrary, he was bold in thought, but timid in action; no one was less clever than he at passing from the general to the particular, and in love affairs he had a most pressing need of a truthworthy Pandarus to extol his perfections and to arrange his rendezvous. Once under way, he did not lack eloquence; he declaimed the languorous harangue with due self-possession, and played the lover at least as well as a provincial *jeune premier;* but, unlike Petit-Jean, the dog's lawyer, the part that he was least expert at was the beginning.

We are bound to admit, therefore, that worthy Tiburce swam in a sea of uncertainty, devising a thousand stratagems more ingenious than those of Polybius, to gain access to his divinity. As he found nothing suitable, he conceived the idea, like Don Cléofas in the *Diable*

Boiteux, of setting fire to the house, in order to have an opportunity to rescue his darling from the flames and thus to prove to her his courage and his devotion; but he reflected that a fireman, more accustomed than he to roam about on burning rafters, might supplant him; and, moreover, that the method of making a pretty girl's acquaintance was forbidden by the Code.

Awaiting a better inspiration, he engraved very clearly on his brain the location of the house, noted the name of the street, and returned to his hotel, reasonably content, for he had imagined that he saw vaguely outlined behind the embroidered muslin at the window the graceful silhouette of the unknown, and a tiny hand put aside a corner of the transparent fabric, doubtless to make sure of his virtuous persistence in standing sentry, without hope of being relieved, at the corner of a lonely street in Antwerp. Was this mere conceit on the part of Tiburce, and was his *bonne fortune* one of those common to nearsighted men, who mistake linen hanging in the window for the scarf of Juliet leaning over toward Romeo, and pots of flowers for princesses in gowns of gold brocade? However that may have been, he went away in high spirits, looking upon himself as one of the most triumphant of gallants. The hostess of the Arms of Brabant and her black maidservant were surprised at the airs of Hamilcar and of a drum-major which he assumed. He lighted his cigar in the most determined fashion, crossed his legs, and began to dandle his slipper on his toes with the superb nonchalance of a mortal who utterly despises all creation, and who is blessed with joys unknown to the ordinary run of mankind; he had at last found the blonde. Jason was no happier when he took the marvelous fleece from the enchanted tree.

Our hero was in the best of all possible situations: a genuine Havana cigar in his mouth, slippers on his feet, a bottle of Rhine wine on his table, with the newspapers of the past week and a pretty little pirated edition of the poems of Alfred de Musset.

He could drink a glass, or even two, of Tokay, read *Namouna,* or an account of the latest ballet; there is no reason, therefore, why we should not leave him alone for a few moments; we have given him enough to dispel his ennui, assuming that a lover can ever suffer from ennui. We will return without him—for he is not the sort of a man to open the doors for us—to the little house on Rue Kipdorp, and we will act as introducers, we will show you what there is behind the embroidered muslin of the lower windows; for, as our first piece of information, we will tell you that the heroine of this tale lived on the ground floor and her name was Gretchen; a name which, albeit not so euphonious as Ethelwina, or Azalia, seemed sufficiently sweet to German or Dutch ears.

Enter, after carefully wiping your feet, for Flemish cleanliness reigns despotically here. In Flanders, people wash their faces only once a week, but by way of compensation the floors are scalded and scraped to the quick twice a day. The floor in the hall, like those in the rest of the house, is made of pine boards, whose natural color is retained, the long, pale veins and the star-like knots being hidden by no varnish; it is sprinkled with a light coating of sea-sand, carefully sifted, the grains of which hold the feet and prevent the slipping so frequent in our salons, where one skates rather than walks. Gretchen's bedroom is at the right, behind that door painted a modest gray, whose copper knob, scoured with pumice, shines as if it were of gold; rub your feet once more upon this mat of rushes; the emperor himself might not enter with muddy feet.

Observe an instant this placid and peaceful interior; there is nothing to attract the eye; everything is calm, sober, restrained; the chamber of Marguerite herself produces no more virginal impression; it is the serenity of innocence which presides over all these petty details so fascinatingly neat.

The brown walls, with an oaken wainscoting waist-high, have no other ornament than a Madonna in colored plaster, dressed in real fabrics like a doll, with satin shoes, a wreath of rushes, a necklace of colored glass, and two small vases of artificial flowers in front of her. At the rear of the room, in the corner most in the shadow, stands a four-posted bed of antique shape, with curtains of green serge and valances with pinked edges and a hem of yellow lace. By the pillow, a figure of the Christ, the lower part of the cross forming a holy-water vessel, stretches His ivory arms above the chaste maiden's slumbers.

A chest which glistens like a mirror, so diligently is it rubbed; a table with twisted legs standing near the window, and covered with spools, skeins of silk, and all the paraphernalia of lacework; a huge, upholstered easy-chair, three or four high-backed chairs of the style of Louis XIII, such as we see in the engravings of Abraham Bosse, composed the furnishing, almost puritanical in its simplicity.

We must add, however, that Gretchen, innocent as she was, had indulged in the luxury of a Venetian mirror, with beveled edges, surrounded by a frame of ebony encrusted with copper. To be sure, to sanctify that profane object, a twig of blessed boxwood was stuck in the frame.

Imagine Gretchen sitting in the great upholstered easy-chair, with her feet upon a stool embroidered by herself, entangling and disentangling with her fairy fingers the almost imperceptible network of a piece of lace just begun; her pretty head leaning over her work is lighted from below by a thousand frolicsome reflections which brighten with fresh and vapory tints the transparent shadow in which she is bathed; a delicate bloom of youth softens the somewhat too Dutch ruddiness of her cheeks, whose freshness the half-light cannot impair; the daylight, admitted sparingly through the upper panes, touches only the top of her brow, and makes the little wisps of hair that rebel against the restraint of the comb gleam like golden tendrils. Cause a sudden ray of sunlight to play upon the cornice and upon the chest, sprinkle dots of gold over the rounded sides of the pewter pots, make the Christ a little yellower; retouch with a deeper shadow the stiff, straight folds of the serge curtains; darken the modernized pallor of the window-glass; stand old Barbara, armed with her broom, at the end of the room, concentrate all the light upon the maiden's head and hands, and you will have a Flemish painting of the best period, which Terburg or Gaspard Netscher would not refuse to sign.

What a contrast between that interior, so clean and neat and so easily understood, and the bedroom of a young Frenchwoman, always filled with clothes, with music-paper, with unfinished watercolors; where every article is out of its place; where tumbled dresses hang on the backs of chairs; and where the household cat tears with her claws the novel carelessly left on the floor! How clear and crystalline is the water in which that half-withered rose stands! How white that linen, how clear and transparent that glassware! Not a particle of dust in the air, not a rug out of place.

Metzu, who painted in a summer-house situated in the center of a lake, in order to preserve the integrity of his colors, might have worked without annoyance in Gretchen's bedroom. The iron back of the fireplace shines like a silver bas-relief.

At this point a sudden apprehension seizes us; is she really the heroine suited to our hero? Is Gretchen really Tiburce's ideal? Is not all this very minute, very commonplace, very practical? is it not rather the Dutch than the Flemish type, and do you really believe that Ruben's models were built like her? Was it not rather merry gossips, highly-colored, abounding in flesh, of robust health, and careless and vulgar manners, whose commonplace reality the painter's genius has idealized? The great masters often play us such tricks. Of an indifferent site they make a lovely landscape; of an ugly maid-servant, a Venus; they do not copy what they see, but what they desire.

And yet Gretchen, although daintier and more refined, really bore a striking resemblance to the Magdalen of Antwerp Cathedral, and Tiburce's imagination might well rest upon her without going astray. It would have been hard for him to find a more magnificent body for the phantom of his painted mistress.

You desire, doubtless, now that you know Gretchen and her bedroom, the bird and its nest, as well as we ourselves do, to have some details concerning her life and her social position. Her history was as simple as possible: Gretchen was the daughter of small trades-people who had been unfortunate, and she had been an orphan for several years; she lived with Barbara, a devoted old servant, upon a small income, the remains of her father's property, and upon the proceeds of her work; as Gretchen made her own dresses and her laces, as she was looked upon by the Flemings as a prodigy of prudence and neatness, she was able, although a simple working-girl, to dress with a certain elegance, and to differ little from the daughters of citizens of the middle class; her linen was fine, her caps were always notable for their whiteness; her boots were the best made in the city; for—we trust that this detail will not displease Tiburce—we must admit that Gretchen had the foot of a Spanish countess, and shod herself to correspond. She was a well-educated girl; she knew how to read, could write well, knew all possible stitches in embroidery, had no rival on earth in needlework, and did not play the piano. Let us add that she had by way of compensation an admirable talent for cooking pear-tarts, carp *au bleu,* and cake; for she prided herself on her culinary skill, like all good housekeepers, and knew how to prepare a thousand little delicacies after her own recipes.

These details will seem without doubt far from aristocratic, but our heroine is neither a princess of diplomacy nor a charming woman of thirty, nor a fashionable singer; she is a simple working-girl of Rue Kipdorp, near the ramparts, Antwerp; but as, in our eyes, women have no real distinction save their beauty, Gretchen is the equal of a duchess who is entitled to sit in the king's presence, and we look upon her sixteen years as sixteen quarterings of nobility.

What was the state of Gretchen's heart? The state of her heart was most satisfactory; she had never loved anything but coffee-colored turtle-doves, gold-fish, and other absolutely innocent small creatures, which could not cause the most savagely jealous lover a moment's anxiety. Every Sunday she went to hear high mass at the Jesuits' church, modestly wrapped in her hood and attended by Barbara carrying her book; then she went home and turned over the leaves of a Bible, "in which God the Father was represented in the costume of an emperor," and of which the wood-engravings aroused her admiration for the thousandth time. If the weather was fine, she went out to Lillo fort, or to the Head of Flanders, with a girl of her own age, also a lace-worker. During the week she seldom went out, except to deliver her work; and Barbara undertook that duty most of the time. A girl of sixteen years who has never thought of love would be an improbable character in a warmer climate; but the atmosphere of Flanders, made heavy by the sickly exhalations from the canals, contains very few aphrodisiac molecules; the flowers are backward there, and when they come are thick and pulpy; their odors, laden with moisture, resemble the odors of decoctions of aromatic herbs; the fruits are watery; the earth and the sky, saturated with moisture, send back and forth the vapors which they cannot absorb, and which the sun tries in vain to drink with its pale lips; the women who live in this bath of mist have no difficulty in being virtuous, for, according to Byron, that rascal of a sun is a great seducer and has made more conquests than Don Juan.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Gretchen, in such a moral atmosphere, was a perfect stranger to all ideas of love, even under the form of marriage, a legal and permissible form if such there be. She has read no bad novels, nor even any good ones; she had not any male relatives, cousins or second cousins. Lucky Tiburce! Moreover, the sailors with their short, colored pipes, the captains of the East-Indiamen who strolled about the city during their brief time on shore, and the dignified merchants who went to the Bourse, revolving figures in the wrinkles of their foreheads, and who cast their fleeting shadows into Gretchen's sanctum as they walked by the house, were not at all calculated to inflame the imagination.

Let us admit, however, that, despite her maidenly ignorance, the laceworker had remarked Tiburce as a well-turned cavalier with regular features; she had seen him several times at the cathedral, in rapt contemplation before the *Descent from the Cross,* and attributed his ecstatic attitude to an excessive piety most edifying in so young a man. As she whirled her bobbins about, she thought of the stranger of Meïr Square.

and abandoned herself to innocent reverie. One day even, under the influence of that thought, she rose, and unconscious of her own act, went to her mirror, which she consulted for a long while; she looked at herself full-faced, in profile, in all possible lights, and discovered—what was quite true—that her complexion was more silky than a sheet of rice or camellia paper; that she had blue eyes of a marvelous limpidity, charming teeth in a mouth as red as a peach, and fair hair of the loveliest shade. She noticed for the first time her youthful charm and her beauty; she took the white rose which stood in the pretty glass, placed it in her hair, and smiled to see how that simple flower embellished her; coquetry was born and love would soon follow it.

But it is a long time since we left Tiburce; what had he been doing at the Arms of Brabant, while we furnished this information concerning the laceworker? He had written upon a very fine sheet of paper what was probably a declaration of love, unless it was a challenge; for several other sheets, besmeared and marred by erasures, which lay on the floor, proved that it was a document very difficult to draw up, and of great importance. After finishing it, he took his cloak and bent his steps once more toward Rue Kipdorp.

Gretchen's lamp, a star of peace and toil, shone softly behind the glass, and the shadow of the girl as she leaned over her work was cast upon the transparent muslin. Tiburce, more excited than a robber about to turn the key of a treasure-chest, drew near the window with the step of a wolf, passed his hand through the bars, and buried in the soft earth of the vase of carnations the corner of his letter thrice folded, hoping that Gretchen could not fail to see it when she opened her window in the morning to water her flowers. That done, he withdrew with a step as light as if the soles of his boots were covered with felt.

Chapter IV

A CERTIFICATE OF BEAUTY

The fresh blue light of the morning paled the sickly yellow of the lanterns, which were almost burned out; the Scheldt streamed like a sweating horse, and the daylight was beginning to filter through the rents in the mist, when Gretchen's window opened. Gretchen's eyes were still swimming in languor, and the mark left on her delicate cheek by a fold of the pillow showed that she had slept without moving in her little virginal bed, that profound sleep of which youth alone has the secret. She was anxious to see how her dear carnations had passed the night, and had hastily wrapped herself in the first garment that came to hand; that graceful and modest *déshabillé* became her wondrously; and if the idea of a goddess can be reconciled with a little cap of Flanders, linen embellished with lace, and a dressing-sack of white dimity, we will venture to say that she had the aspect of Aurora opening the gates of the East; this comparison is perhaps a little too majestic for a laceworker who is about to water a garden contained in two porcelain pots; but surely Aurora was less fresh and rosy, especially the Aurora of Flanders, whose eyes are always a little dull.

Gretchen, armed with a large pitcher,

prepared to water her carnations, and Tiburce's ardent declaration came very near being drowned beneath a moral deluge of cold water; luckily the white paper caught Gretchen's eye; she disinterred the letter and was greatly surprised when she saw the contents. There were only two sentences, one in French, the other in German; the French sentence was composed of two words, "je t'aime;" the German of three, "ich liebe dich;" which means exactly the same thing—"I love you." Tiburce had provided for the possibility that Gretchen would understand only her mother tongue; he was, as you see, a consummately prudent person.

Really, it was well worth while to besmear more paper than Malherbe ever used to compose a stanza, and to drink, on the pretext of exciting the imagination, a bottle of excellent Tokay, in order to arrive at that ingenious and novel thought. But, despite its apparent simplicity, Tiburce's letter was perhaps a masterpiece of libertinism, unless it was mere folly, which is possible. However, was it not a master-stroke to let fall thus, like a drop of melted lead, into the midst of that tranquillity of mind that single phrase, "I love you?" And was not its fall certain to produce, as on the surface of a lake, an infinite number of radiations and concentric circles?

In truth, what do all the most ardent love-letters contain? What remains of all the bombast of passion when one pricks it with the pin of reason? All the eloquence of Saint-Preux reduces itself to a phrase; and Tiburce had really attained great profundity by concentrating in that brief sentence the flowery rhetoric of his first drafts.

He did not sign it; indeed, what information would his name have given? He was a stranger in the city, he did not know Gretchen's name, and, to tell the truth, cared very little about it. The affair was more romantic, more mysterious thus; the least fertile imagination might build thereupon twenty octavo volumes more or less probable. Was he a sylph, a pure spirit, a lovelorn angel, a handsome officer, a banker's son, a young nobleman, a peer of England with an income of a million, a Russian feudal lord, with a name ending in *off*, many roubles, and a multitude of fur collars? Such were the serious questions which that laconically eloquent letter must inevitably raise. The familiar form of address, which is used only to Divinity, betrayed a violence of passion which Tiburce was very far from feeling, but which might produce the best effect upon the girl's mind, as exaggeration always seems more natural to a woman than the truth.

Gretchen did not hesitate an instant to believe the young man of Meïr Square to be the author of the note; women never err in such matters; they have a wonderful instinct, a scent, which takes the place of familiarity with the world and knowledge of the passions. The most virtuous of them knows more than Don Juan with his list.

We have described our heroine as a very artless, very ignorant, and very respectable young woman; we must confess, however, that she did not feel the virtuous indignation which a woman ought to feel who receives a note written in two languages and containing such a decided incongruity. She felt rather a thrill of pleasure, and a faint pink flush passed over her face. That letter was to her like a certificate of beauty; it reassured her concerning herself, and gave her a definite rank; it was the first glance that had ever penetrated her modest obscurity; the small proportions of her fortune prevented her being sought in marriage. Thus far she had been considered simply as a child, Tiburce consecrated her a young woman; she felt for him such gratitude as the pearl must feel for the diver who discovers it in its coarse shell beneath the dark cloak of the ocean.

This first impression passed, Gretchen experienced a sensation well known to all those who have been brought up strictly, and who never have had a secret; the letter embarrassed her like a block of marble; she did not know what to do with it. Her room seemed to her not to have enough dark corners, enough impenetrable hiding places, in which to conceal it from all eyes. She put it in the chest behind a pile of linen; but after a few moments she took it out again; the letter blazed through the boards of the wardrobe like Doctor Faust's microcosm in Rembrandt's etching. Gretchen looked for another, safer place; Barbara might need napkins or sheets and might find it. She took a chair, stood upon it, and placed the letter on the canopy of her bed; the paper burned her hands like a piece of red-hot iron.

Barbara entered to arrange the room. Gretchen, affecting the most indifferent air imaginable, took her usual seat and resumed her work of the day before; but at every step that Barbara took toward the bed, she fell into a horrible fright; the arteries in her temples throbbed, the sweat of anguish stood upon her forehead, her fingers became entangled in the threads, and it seemed to her that an invisible hand was grasping her heart. Barbara seemed to her to have an uneasy, suspicious expression which was not customary with her. At last the old woman went out, with a basket on her arm, to do her marketing. Poor Gretchen breathed freely again, and took down her letter, which she put in her pocket; but soon it made her itch; the creaking of the paper terrified her, and she put it in her breast; for that is where a woman puts everything that embarrasses her. The waist of a dress is a cupboard without a key, an arsenal filled with flowers, locks of hair, lockets, and sentimental epistles; a sort of letter box, in which one mails all the correspondence of the heart.

But why did Gretchen not burn that insignificant scrap of paper which caused her such keen terror? In the first place, Gretchen had never in her life experienced such poignant emotion; she was terrified and enchanted at once. And then, pray tell us why lovers persist in not destroying letters which may lead later to their detection and perdition? It is because a letter is a visible soul; because passion has passed through that paltry sheet with its electric fluid, and has imparted life to it. To burn a letter is to commit a moral murder; in the ashes of a destroyed correspondence there are always some particles of two hearts.

So Gretchen kept her letter in the folds of her dress, beside a little gold crucifix, which was greatly surprised to find itself in close proximity to a love-letter.

Like a shrewd young man, Tiburce left his declaration time to work. He played the dead man and did not again appear in Rue Kipdorp. Gretchen was beginning to be alarmed, when one fine morning she perceived in the bars of her window a superb bouquet of exotic flowers. Tiburce had passed that way; that was his visiting-card.

The bouquet afforded much pleasure to the young working-girl, who had become accustomed to the thought of Tiburce, and whose self-esteem was secretly hurt by the small amount of zeal which he had shown after such an ardent beginning; she took the bunch of flowers, filled with water one of her pretty Saxon vases with a raised blue design, untied the stalks and put them in water, in order to keep them longer. On this occasion she told the first lie of her life, informing Barbara that the bouquet was a present from a lady to whom she had carried some lace, and who knew her liking for flowers.

During the day Tiburce came to cool his heels in front of the house, on the pretext of making a drawing of some odd bit of architecture; he remained for a long while, working with a blunt pencil on a piece of wretched vellum. Gretchen played the dead in her turn; not a fold stirred, not a window opened; the house seemed asleep. Entrenched in a corner, she was able by means of the mirror in her work-box to watch Tiburce at her ease. She saw that he was tall, well-built, with an air of distinction in his whole person, regular features, a soft and melting eye, and a melancholy expression, which touched her deeply, accustomed as she was to the rubicund health of Brabantine faces. Moreover, Tiburce, although he was neither a lion nor a dandy, did not lack natural refinement, and must have appeared an ultra-fashionable to a young girl so innocent as Gretchen; on Boulevard de Gand he would have seemed hardly up-to-date, on Rue Kipdorp he was magnificent.

In the middle of the night, Gretchen, obeying an adorable childish impulse, rose and went barefooted to look at her bouquet; she buried her face in the flowers, and kissed Tiburce on the red lips of a magnificent dahlia; she thrust her head passionately into the multicolored waves of that bath of flowers, inhaling with long breaths intoxicating perfume, breathing with full nostrils, until she felt her heart melt and her eyes grow moist. When she stood erect, her cheeks glistened with pearly drops, and her fascinating little nose, smeared as prettily as possible with the golden dust from the stamens, was a lovely shade of yellow. She wiped it laughingly, returned to bed and to sleep; as you may imagine, she saw Tiburce in all her dreams.

In all this what had become of the Magdalen of the *Descent from the Cross?* She still reigned without a rival in our young enthusiast's heart; she had the advantage over the loveliest living woman of being impossible; with her there was no disillusionment, no satiety; she did not break the spell by commonplace or absurd phrases; she was always there, motionless, adhering religiously to the sovereign lines within which the great master had confined her; sure of being beautiful to all eternity; and relating to the world in her silent language the dream of a sublime genius.

The little laceworker of Rue Kipdorp was truly a charming creature; but how far were her arms from having that undulating and supple contour, that potent energy, all enveloped with grace!

how juvenile was the slender curve of her shoulders! and how pale the shade of her hair beside those strange, rich tones with which Rubens had warmed the rippling locks of the placid sinner! Such was the language which Tiburce used to himself as he walked upon the Quay of the Scheldt.

However, seeing that he made little progress in his love affair with the painting, he reasoned with himself most sensibly concerning his monumental folly. He returned to Gretchen, not without a long-drawn sigh of regret; he did not love her, but at all events she reminded him of his dream, as a daughter reminds one of an adored mother who is dead. We will not dwell on the details of this little intrigue, for everyone can easily imagine them. Chance, that great procurer, afforded our two lovers a very natural opportunity to speak.

Gretchen had gone as usual to the Head of Flanders on the other side of the Scheldt with her young friend. They had run after butterflies, made wreaths of blue-bottles, and rolled about on the straw in the mills, so long that night had come and the ferryman had made his last trip, unperceived by them. They were standing there, both decidedly perturbed, with one foot in the water, shouting with all the strength of their little silvery voices for him to come back and get them; but the playful breeze carried their shouts away, and there was no reply save the soft splashing of the waves on the sand. Luckily, Tiburce was drifting about in a small sailboat; he heard them and offered to take them across; an offer which the friend eagerly accepted, despite Gretchen's embarrassed air and her flushed cheeks. Tiburce escorted her home and took care to organize a boating party for the following Sunday, with the assent of Barbara, whom his assiduous attendance at the churches and his devotion to the picture of the *Descent from the Cross* had very favorably disposed.

Tiburce met with no great resistance on Gretchen's part. She was so pure that she did not defend herself, because she did not know that she was attacked; and besides, she loved Tiburce; for although he talked very jocosely and expressed himself upon all subjects with ironical heedlessness, she divined that he was unhappy, and a woman's instinct is to console: grief attracts them as a mirror attracts the lark.

Although the young Frenchman was most attentive to her and treated her with extreme courtesy, she felt that she did not possess his heart entirely, and that there were corners in his mind to which she never penetrated. Some hidden thought of superior moment seemed to engross him and it was evident that he made frequent journeys into an unknown world; his fancy, borne away by the involuntary flappings of its wings, lost its footing constantly and beat against the ceiling, seeking, like a captive bird, some issue through which to dart forth into the blue sky. Often he scrutinized her with extraordinary earnestness for hours at a time, sometimes with a satisfied expression, and again with an air of dissatisfaction. That look was not the look of a lover. Gretchen could not understand such behavior, but as she was sure of Tiburce's loyalty, she was not alarmed.

Tiburce, on the pretext that Gretchen's name was hard to pronounce, had christened her Magdalen, a substitution which she had gladly accepted, feeling a secret pleasure in having her lover call her by a different and mysterious name, as if she were to him another woman. He still made frequent visits to the cathedral, teasing his mania by impotent contemplations; and on those days Gretchen paid the penalty for the harsh treatment of the Magdalen; the real had to pay for the ideal. He was cross, bored, tiresome, which the honest creature ascribed to irritated nerves or too persistent reading.

Nevertheless, Gretchen was a charming girl, who deserved to be loved on her own account. Not in all the divisions of Flanders, in Brabant or Hainault, could you find a whiter and fresher skin and hair of a lovelier shade; her hand was at once plump and slender, with nails like agate,—a genuine princess's hand; and—a rare perfection in the country of Rubens—a small foot.

Ah! Tiburce, Tiburce, who longed to hold in your arms a real ideal, and to kiss your chimera on the mouth, beware! Chimeras, despite their rounded throats, their swan's wings, and their sparkling smiles, have sharp teeth and tearing claws. The evil creatures will pump the pure blood from your heart, and leave you dryer and more hollow than a sponge; avoid that unbridled ambition, do not try to make marble statues descend from their pedestals, and do not address your supplications to dumb canvases; all your painters and your poets were afflicted with the same disease that you have; they tried to make creations of their own in the midst of God's creation. With marble, with colors, with the rhythm of verses, they translated and defined their dream of beauty; their works are not the portraits of their mistresses, but of the mistresses they longed for and you would seek in vain their models on earth. Go and buy another bouquet for Gretchen, who is a sweet and lovely maiden; drop your dead women and your phantoms, and try to live with the people of this world.

Chapter V

TO PARIS!

Yes, Tiburce, though it will surprise you greatly to learn it, Gretchen is vastly superior to you. She has never read the poets, and does not even know the names of Homer and Virgil; the lamentations of the Wandering Jew, of Henriette and Damon, printed on wood and roughly-colored, compose all of her literature, except the Latin in her mass-book, which she spells out conscientiously every Sunday; Virginie knew little more in the solitude of her paradise of magnolias and roses.

You are, it is true, thoroughly posted in literary affairs. You are profoundly versed in esthetics, esoterics, plastics, architectonics, and poetics; Marphurius and Pancratius had not a finer list of acquirements in *ics*. From Orpheus and Lycophron down to M. de Lamartine's last volume, you have devoured everything that is composed of meters, of rimed lines, and of strophes cast in every possible mold; no romance has escaped you. You have traversed from end to end the vast world of the imagination; you know all the painters from Andrea Rico of Crete, and Bizzamano, down to Messieurs Ingres and Delacroix; you have studied beauty at its purest sources; the bas-reliefs of Ægina the friezes of the Parthenon, the Etruscan vases, the hieratic sculptures of Egypt, Greek art and Roman art, the Gothic and the Renaissance; you have searched and analyzed everything; you have become a sort of jockey of Beauty, whose advice painters take when they desire to select a model, as one consults a groom concerning the purchase of a horse. Certainly no one is more familiar than you with the physical side of woman; you are as expert as an Athenian sculptor on that point; but poetry has engrossed you so much that you have suppressed nature, the world, and life. Your mistresses have been to you simply pictures more or less satisfying; your love for the beauty and attractive ones was in the proportion of a Titian to a Coucher or a Vanloo; but you have never wondered whether anything real throbbed and vibrated beneath that exterior. Although you have a kind heart, grief and joy seem to you like two grimaces which disturb the tranquillity of the outlines; woman is in your eyes a warm statue.

Ah! unhappy child, throw your books into the fire, tear your engraving, shatter your plaster casts, forget Raphael, forget Homer, forget Phidias, since you have not the courage to take a pencil, a pen, or a modeling-tool; of what use is this sterile admiration to you? what will be the end of these insane impulses? Do you demand more of life than it can give you? Great geniuses alone are entitled not to be content with creation. They can go and look the Sphinx squarely in the face, for they solve its riddles. But you are not a great genius; be simple of heart, love those who love you, and, as Jean Paul says, do not ask for moonlight, or for a gondola on Lake Maggiore, or for a rendezvous at Isola Bella.

Become a philanthropic advocate or a concierge; limit your ambition to becoming a voter and a corporal in your company; have what in the world is called a trade; become an honest citizen. At these words no doubt your long hair will stand erect in horror, for you have the same scorn for the simple *bourgeois* that the German student professes for the Philistine, the soldier for the civilian, and the Brahma for the Pariah. You crush with ineffable disdain every worthy tradesman who prefers a vaudeville song to a tercet of Dante, and the muslin of fashionable portrait-painters to a sketch by Michelangelo. Such a man is in your eyes below the brute, and yet there are plain citizens whose minds—and they have minds—are rich with poetic feeling, who are capable of love and devotion, and who experience emotions of which you are incapable, yet whose brain has annihilated the heart.

Look at Gretchen, who has done nothing but water carnations and make lace all her life; she is a thousand times more poetic than you, *monsieur l'artiste,* as they say nowadays; she believes, she hopes, she smiles, and weeps; a word from you brings sunshine or rain to her lovely face; she sits there in her great upholstered arm-chair, beside her window, in a melancholy light, at work upon her usual task; but how her young brain labors! how fast her imagination travels! how many castles in Spain she builds and throws down! See her blush and turn pale, turn hot and cold, like the amorous maiden of the ancient ode; her lace drops from her hands, she has heard on the brick sidewalk a step which she distinguishes among a thousand, with all the acuteness which passion gives to the senses; although you arrive at the appointed time, she has been waiting for you a long while. All day you have been her sole preoccupation; she has asked herself: "Where is he now?—What is he doing?—Is he thinking of me as I am thinking of him?—Perhaps he is ill; yesterday he seemed to me paler than usual, and he had a distressed and preoccupied expression when he left me; can anything have happened to him? Has he received unpleasant news from Paris?"—and all those questions which love propounds to itself in its sublime disquietude.

That poor child, with her great loving heart, has displaced the center of her existence, she no longer lives except in you and through you. By virtue of the wonderful mystery of the incarnation of love, her soul inhabits your body, her spirit descends upon you and visits you; she would throw herself in front of the sword which should threaten your breast; the blow that should reach you would cause her death; and yet you have taken her up simply as a plaything, to use her as a manikin for your ideal. To merit such a wealth of love, you have darted a few glances at her, given her a few bouquets, and declaimed in a passionate tone the commonplaces of romance. A more earnest lover would have failed perhaps; for, alas! to inspire love, it is not necessary to feel it oneself. You have deliberately disturbed for all time the limpidity of that modest existence. Upon my word, Master Tiburce, adorer of the blonde type and contemner of the *bourgeois*, you have done a cruel thing; we regret to be obliged to tell you so.

Gretchen was not happy; she divined an invisible rival between herself and her lover and jealousy seized her; she watched Tiburce's movements, and saw that he went only to his hotel, the Arms of Brabant, and to the cathedral on Meïr Square. She was reassured.

"What is the matter with you," she asked him once, "that you are always looking at the figure of the Magdalen supporting the Saviour's body in the picture of the *Descent from the Cross?*"

"Because she looks like you," Tiburce replied.

Gretchen blushed with pleasure and ran to the mirror to verify the accuracy of the comparison; she saw that she had the unctuous and glowing eyes, the fair hair, the arched forehead, the general shape of the saint's face.

"So that is the reason that you call me Magdalen and not Gretchen, or Marguerite, which is my real name?"

"Precisely so," replied Tiburce, with an embarrassed air.

"I would never have believed that I was so lovely," said Gretchen; "and it makes me very happy, for you will love me better for it."

Serenity returned for some time to the maiden's heart, and we must confess that Tiburce made virtuous efforts to combat his insane passion. The fear of becoming a monomaniac came to his mind; and to cut short that obsession he determined to return to Paris.

Before starting, he went to pay one last visit to the cathedral, and his friend the beadle opened the shutters of the *Descent from the Cross* for him.

The Magdalen seemed to him more sad and disconsolate than usual; great tears rolled down her pallid cheeks, her mouth was contracted by a spasm of grief, a bluish circle surrounded her melting eyes, the sunbeam had left her hair, and there was, in her whole attitude, an expression of despair and prostration; one would have said that she no longer believed in the resurrection of her beloved Lord. In truth, the Christ was that day of such a sallow, greenish hue that it was difficult to imagine that life could ever return to His decomposing flesh. All the other people in the picture seemed to share that feeling; their eyes were dull, their expressions mournful, and their halos gave forth only a leaden gleam; the livid hue of death had invaded that canvas formerly so warm and full of life.

Tiburce was deeply touched by the expression of supreme melancholy upon the Magdalen's face, and his resolution to depart was shaken. He preferred to attribute it to a secret sympathy rather than to a caprice of the light. The weather was dull, the rain cut the sky with slender threads, and a ray of daylight, drenched with water and mist, forced its way with difficulty through the glass, streaming and beaten by the wing of the squall; that reason was much too plausible to be admitted by Tiburce.

"Ah!" he said to himself in an undertone, quoting a verse of one of our young poets, " 'How I would love thee tomorrow if thou wert living!'—Why art thou only an impalpable ghost attached for ever to the meshes of this canvas and held captive by this thin layer of varnish? Why art thou the phantom of life, without the power to live? What does it profit thee to be lovely, noble, and great, to have in thine eyes the flame of earthly love and of divine love, and about thy head the resplendent halo of repentance, being simply a little oil and paint spread on canvas in a certain way? Oh! lovely adored one, turn toward me for an instant that glance, at once so soft and so dazzling; sinner, take pity upon an insane passion, thou, to whom love opened the gates of Heaven; descend from that frame, stand erect in thy long, green satin skirt; for it is a long while that thou hast knelt before the sublime scaffold; these holy women will guard the body without thee and will suffice for the death vigil. Come, Magdalen, come! thou hast not emptied all thy jars of perfume at the feet of the Divine Master! there must remain enough of nard and cinnamon in the bottom of thy onyx jar to renew the luster of thy hair dimmed by the ashes of repentance. Thou shalt have, as of yore, strings of pearls, negro pages, and coverlets of the purple of Sidon. Come, Magdalen, although thou hast been two thousand years dead, I have enough of youth and ardor to reanimate thy dust. Ah! specter of beauty, let me but hold thee in my arms one instant, then let me die!"

A stifled sigh, as faint and soft as the wail of a dove mortally wounded, echoed sadly in the air. Tiburce thought that the Magdalen had answered him.

It was Gretchen, who, hidden behind a pillar, had seen all, heard all, understood all. Something had broken in her heart; she was not loved.

That evening Tiburce came to see her; he was pale and depressed. Gretchen was as white as wax. The excitement of the morning had driven the color from her cheeks, like the powder from the wings of a butterfly.

"I start for Paris tomorrow; will you come with me?"

"To Paris or elsewhere; wherever you please," replied Gretchen, in whom every shred of will-power seemed extinct; "shall I not be unhappy everywhere?"

Tiburce flashed a keen and searching glance at her.

"Come tomorrow morning; I will be ready; I have given you my heart and my life. Dispose of your servant."

She went with Tiburce to the Arms of Brabant, to assist him to make his preparations for departure; she packed his books, his linen, and his pictures, then she returned to her little room on Rue Kipdorp; she did not undress, but threw herself fully dressed upon her bed.

An unconquerable depression had seized upon her soul; everything about her seemed sad: the bouquets were withered in their blue glass vases; the lamps flickered and cast a dim and intermittent light; the ivory Christ bent His head in despair upon His breast; and the blessed boxwood assumed the aspect of a cypress dipped in lustral water.

The little Virgin from her little recess watched her in surprise with her enamel eyes; and the storm, pressing his knee against the window-pane, made the lead partitions groan and creak.

The heaviest furniture, the most unimportant utensils, wore an expression of intelligence and compassion; they cracked dolorously and gave forth mournful sounds. The easy-chair held out its long, unoccupied arms; the hop-vine on the trellis passed its little green hand familiarly through a broken pane; the kettle complained and wept among the ashes; the curtains of the bed fell in more lifeless and more distressed folds; the whole room seemed to understand that it was about to lose its young mistress. Gretchen called her old servant, who wept bitterly; she handed her her keys and the certificates of her little income, then opened the cage of her two-coffee-colored turtle-doves and set them free.

The next morning she was on her way to Paris with Tiburce.

CHAPTER VI

FROM THE CANVAS

TIBURCE's apartment greatly surprised the young Antwerp maiden, accustomed to Flemish strictness and method. That mixture of luxury and heedlessness upset all her ideas. For instance, a crimson velvet cover was thrown upon a wretched broken table; magnificent candelabra of the most ornate style, which would not have been out of place in the boudoir of a king's mistress, were supplied with paltry *bobèches* of common glass, which the candles, burning down to the very bottom, had burst; a china vase of beautiful material and workmanship and of great value had received a kick in the side, and its splintered fragments were held together by iron wire; exceedingly rare engravings were fastened to the wall by pins; a Greek cap was on the head of an antique Venus, and a multitude of incongruous objects, such as Turkish pipes, narghiles, daggers, yataghans, Chinese shoes, and Indian slippers, encumbered the chairs and what-nots.

The painstaking Gretchen had no rest until all this was cleaned, neatly hung, and labeled; like God who made the world from chaos, she made of that medley a delightful apartment. Tiburce, who was accustomed to its confusion and who knew perfectly where things ought not to be, had difficulty at first in recognizing his surroundings; but he ended by becoming used to it. The objects which he disarranged returned to their places as if by magic. He realized for the first time what comfort meant. Like all imaginative people, he neglected details. The door of his bedroom was gilded and covered with arabesques, but it had no weather-strips; like the genuine savage that he was, he loved splendor and not well-being; he would have worn, like the Orientals, waistcoats of gold brocade lined with toweling.

And yet, although he seemed to enjoy this more human and more reasonable mode of life, he was often sad and distraught; he would remain whole days upon his divan, flanked by two piles of cushions, with eyes closed and hands hanging, and not utter a word; Gretchen dared not question him, she was so afraid of his reply. The scene in the cathedral had remained engraved upon her memory, in painful and ineffaceable strokes.

He continued to think of the Magdalen at Antwerp; absence made her more beautiful in his sight; he saw her before him like a luminous apparition. An imaginary sunlight riddled her hair with rays of gold, her dress had the transparency of an emerald, her shoulders gleamed like Parian marble. Her tears had dried, and youth shone in all its bloom upon the down of her rosy cheeks; she seemed entirely consoled for the death of the Christ; whose bluish white foot she supported heedlessly, while she turned her face towards her earthly lover. The rigid outlines of sanctity were softened and had become undulating and supple; the sinner reappeared in the person of the penitent; her neckerchief floated more freely, her skirt swelled out in alluring and worldly folds, her arms were amorously outstretched, as if ready to seize a victim of love. The great saint had become a courtesan, and had transformed herself into a temptress. In a more credulous age Tiburce would have seen therein some underhand machination of him who goes prowling about, "seeking whom he may devour"; he would have believed that the devil's claw was upon his shoulder and that he was bewitched in due form.

How did it happen that Tiburce, beloved by a charming young girl, simple of heart, and endowed with intelligence, possessed of beauty, youth, innocence, all the real gifts which come from God, and which no one can acquire, persisted in pursuing a mad chimera, an impossible dream; and how could that mind, so keen and powerful, have arrived at such a degree of aberration? Such things are seen every day; have we not, each one of us in our respective spheres, been loved obscurely by some humble heart, while we sought more exalted loves? Have not we trodden under foot a pale violet with its timid perfume, while striding along with lowered eyes toward a cold and gleaming star which cast its ironic glance upon us from the depths of infinity? Has not the abyss its magnetism and the impossible its fascination?

One day Tiburce entered Gretchen's chamber carrying a bundle; he took from it a skirt and waist of green satin, made after the antique style, a chemisette of a shape long out of fashion, and a string of huge pearls. He requested Gretchen to put on those garments, which could not fail to be most becoming to her, and to keep them in the house; he told her by way of explanation that he was very fond of sixteenth-century costumes, and that by falling in with that fancy of his she would confer very great pleasure upon him. You will readily believe that a young girl did not need to be asked twice to try on a new gown; she was soon dressed, and when she entered the salon, Tiburce could not withhold a cry of surprise and admiration. He found something to criticize, however, in the head-dress, and, releasing the hair from the teeth of the comb, he spread it out in great curls over Gretchen's shoulders, like the Magdalen's hair in the *Descent from the Cross.* That done, he gave a different twist to some folds of the skirt, loosened the laces of the waist, rumpled the neckerchief, which was too stiff and starchy, and, stepping back a few feet, contemplated his work.

Doubtless you have seen what are called living pictures, at some special performance. The most beautiful actresses are selected, and dressed and posed in such wise as to reproduce some familiar painting. Tiburce had achieved a masterpiece of that sort; you would have said that it was a bit cut from Ruben's canvas.

Gretchen made a movement.

"Don't stir, you will spoil the pose; you are so lovely thus!" cried Tiburce in a tone of entreaty.

The poor girl obeyed and remained motionless for several minutes. When she turned, Tiburce saw that her face was bathed in tears.

He realized that she knew all.

Gretchen's tears flowed silently down her cheeks, without contraction of the features, without effort, like pearls overflowing from the too full cup of her eyes, lovely azure flowers of divine limpidity; grief could not mar the harmony of her face, and her tears were lovelier than another woman's smile.

Gretchen wiped them away with the back of her hand, and leaning upon the arm of a chair, she said in a voice tremulous and melting with emotion:

"Oh, how you have made me suffer, Tiburce! Jealousy of a new sort wrung my heart; although I had no rival, I was betrayed none the less; you loved a painted woman; she possessed your thoughts, your dreams; she alone seemed fair to you, who saw only her in all the world; plunged in that mad contemplation, you did not even see that I had wept. And I believed for an instant that you loved me, whereas I was simply a duplicate, a counterfeit of your passion! I know well that in your eyes I am only an ignorant little girl who speaks French with a German accent that makes you laugh; my face pleases you as a reminder of your imaginary mistress; you see in me a pretty manikin which you drape according to your fancy; but I tell you the manikin suffers and loves you."

Tiburce tried to draw her to his heart, but she released herself and continued:

"You talked to me enchantingly of love, you taught me that I was lovely and charming to look upon, you pressed my hands and declared that no fairy had smaller ones; you said of my hair that it was more precious than a prince's golden cloak, and of my eyes that the angels came down from Heaven to look at themselves in them, and that they stayed so long that they were late in returning and were scolded by the good Lord; and all this in a sweet and penetrating voice, with an accent of truth that would have deceived those more experienced than I. Alas! my resemblance to the Magdalen in the picture kindled your imagination and gave you that artificial eloquence; she answered you through my mouth; I gave her the life that she lacks, and I served to complete your illusion. If I have given you a few moments of happiness, I forgive you for making me play this part. After all, it is not your fault if you do not know how to love, if the impossible alone attracts you, if you long only for that which you cannot attain. You are ambitious to love, you are deceived concerning yourself, you will never love. You must have perfection, the ideal and poesy—all those things which do not exist. Instead of loving in a woman the love that she has for you, of being grateful to her for her devotion and for the gift of her heart, you look to see if she resembles that plaster Venus in your study. Woe to her if the outline of her brow has not the desired curve! You are concerned about the grain of her skin, the shade of her hair, the fineness of her wrists and her ankles, but never about her heart. You are not a lover, poor Tiburce, you are simply a painter. What you have taken for passion is simply admiration for shape and beauty; you were in love with the talent of Rubens, not with the Magdalen; your vocation of painter stirred vaguely within you and produced those frantic outbursts which you could not control. Thence came all the degradation of your fantasy. I have discovered this, because I love you. Love is a woman's genius, her mind is not engrossed in selfish contemplation! Since I have been here I have turned over your books, I have read your poets, I have become almost a scholar. The veil has fallen from my eyes. I have discovered many things that I should never have suspected. Thus I have been able to read clearly in your heart. You used to draw—take up your pencils again. You must place your dreams upon canvas, and all this great agitation will calm down of itself. If I cannot be your mistress, I will at all events be your model."

She rang and told the servant to bring an easel, canvas, colors, and brushes.

When the servant had prepared everything, the chaste girl suddenly let her garments fall to the floor with sublime immodesty, and raising her hair, like Aphrodite come forth from the sea, stood in the bright light.

"Am I not as lovely as your *Venus of Milo?*" she asked with a sweet little pout.

After two hours, the face was already alive and half protruding from the canvas; in a week it was finished. It was not a perfect picture, however; but an exquisite touch of refinement and of purity, a wonderful softness of tone, and the noble simplicity of the arrangement made it noteworthy, especially to connoisseurs. That slender white and fair-haired figure, standing forth in an unconstrained attitude against the twofold azure of the sky and the sea, and presenting herself to the world nude and smiling, had a reflection of antique poesy and recalled the best periods of Greek sculpture.

Tiburce had already forgotten the Magdalen of Antwerp.

"Well!" said Gretchen, "are you satisfied with your model?"

"When would you like to publish our banns?" was Tiburce's reply.

"I shall be the wife of a great painter," she said, throwing her arms about her lover's neck; "but do not forget, monsieur, that it was I who discovered your genius, that priceless jewel—I, little Gretchen of Rue Kipdorp!"

The Evil Eye

CHAPTER I

THE TRAVELER

THE good ship *Léopold,* the large steamer which plies between Marseilles and Naples, had just doubled Cape Procida. The passengers were all on deck, suddenly cured of their sea-sickness by the sight of land, a more efficacious remedy than Malta pills and other recipes prescribed by physicians for this purpose.

A group of Englishmen were assembled on the upper deck, reserved for first-class passengers. They were all close-shaven, their cravats were tied with religious care, and their high, straight collars were as stiff as bristol-board; their hands were encased in Suède gloves; and the varnish on their boots shone brightly in the sun. This group was composed of lords, members of the House of Commons, great merchants, Regent Street tailors, and Sheffield cutlers—all very serious, very dignified, and unspeakably bored. There were women in profusion, too, as Englishwomen are not as sedentary as the females of other countries, and rarely miss an opportunity to get away from their little island. These charming persons murmured the sacramental phrase: "*Vedi Napolie poi mori,*" with the most delicious English accent, while they consulted their tourist guides or made notes of their impressions in their little memorandum-books, without paying the least attention to the tender glances cast upon them, *à la* don Juan, by a number of conceited Parisians who hovered about this bevy of loveliness, while the indignant mammas read long lectures to these fair misses on the impropriety of the French.

Three or four young men puffed away at their cigars as they walked up and down the quarter-deck, and eagerly noted the ever-changing panorama which was passing before their enchanted eyes. It was evident that these young men were artists, judging by their straw hats, their sack coats ornamented with huge horn buttons, and their wide duck trousers, without taking into consideration the fact that they wore their moustaches *à la* Van Dyck, and their hair either curled *à la* Rubens or cut straight *à la* Paul Véronèse.

The third-class passengers were grouped in the bow of the steamer, leaning against the rigging or seated on coils of rope, munching away contentedly at the remnants of their provisions, and totally oblivious of the magnificence of their surroundings.

It was a glorious day; the blue waves came in gentle ripples, having barely the strength to obliterate the foaming wake of the vessel; the vapor from the smoke-stack, which formed in clouds in the beautiful sky, gradually dissolved in snowy flakes, while the paddle-wheels, revolving in a shower of liquid gold, joyfully churned the waters as if conscious of the proximity of a port.

The long line of hills extending from Pausilippi to Vesuvius which forms the wonderful gulf in which Naples lies like a nymph reposing on the banks of a stream after a bath, began to unfold itself in the distance in purple undulations, and stood out in bold relief against the azure sky; several little white specks on the dark background denoted the presence of villas, scattered here and there over the country. The sails of the fishing-smacks as they entered the harbor glided over the blue waters like the feathers of a swan scattered by the breeze, proving the activity of man even in the midst of the majestic solitude of the ocean.

A few more turns of the paddle-wheels and the ship comes in sight of the Château of Saint Elmé and the Convent of St. Martin, which stand out prominently on the summit of the mountain at whose base Naples is situated, rising far above the church steeples, the house-tops, the terraces of the hotels, and the *façades* of the palaces. Before long the Château d'Œuf, crouching on its foam-washed reef, seemed to be advancing to meet the steamer, and the jetty, with its revolving light, stretched itself out like an arm holding a torch.

At the extremity of the bay, Vesuvius now changed the bluish tints which distance had lent it, for a more vigorous color; her sides were furrowed with ravines and streaks of congealed lava, and from her summit, pierced with little holes like a pepper-box, small jets of white smoke ascended every now and then.

Chiatamone, Pizzo-Falcone, the wharf of Santa Lucia, lined with hotels, the Palazzo-Real, with its myriads of balconies, the Palazzo-Nuovo, and the Arsenal were now in view, while the ships of all nations intermingled their masts and spars like a forest of leafless trees.

At this moment a passenger, who had not stirred out of his cabin during the entire trip, made his first appearance on deck. Whether he kept to himself on account of sea-sickness, or whether it was because he did not care to mingle with the other passengers, is not known; moreover, this spectacle, novel to the others, had lost all charms to him, as he had seen all these interesting points time and again.

He was between twenty-six and twenty-eight years old, at least a stranger would have formed such an opinion at first sight. His hair was of that peculiar dark brown which the English style auburn. In the sun it shone like a dull copper, while in the dark it was almost black; he had a forehead which would have delighted a phrenologist, an aquiline nose of noble curve, well-shaped lips, and a round and symmetrical chin; and yet all these features, regular though they were, did not form a pleasing *ensemble*. They lacked that mysterious harmony which softens the outlines and moulds them to perfection. There is a certain legend which tells of an Italian painter, who, wishing to represent the archangel, composed a mask of incongruous beauty, and in this manner gave his portrait a certain terrible expression without resorting to horns, inverted eyebrows and a contracted mouth. The stranger's countenance produced just such an effect. His eyes, especially, were extraordinary; his black eyelashes contrasted strangely with the peculiar pale gray of the pupils and with his dark brown hair; then, the thinness of the bones in his nose made them appear closer together than the principles of drawing permit them to be, and their expression was really indefinable. When they were not resting on something, a peculiar melancholy and languid look was depicted in the gleaming orbs; if they fixed themselves on any one, the eyebrows immediately contracted and frowned until they formed a perpendicular wrinkle in his forehead; from a pale gray, the pupils would turn green, tinged with little black spots, and streaked with yellow; the glance they emitted was sharp, almost painful; then, suddenly, everything acquired its former placidity, and this person of mephistophelic appearance once more assumed the bearing of a young man of the world, a member of the Jockey Club, who is about to spend the season in Naples, and is thoroughly contented to tread on a pavement of lava in preference to the unsteady deck of *The Léopold*.

His attire was elegant, though not conspicuous: a frock-coat of dark blue, a polka-dotted tie carefully knotted, a waistcoat of the same pattern as the tie, light gray trousers, and a pair of fine patent-leather shoes completed his toilette; his watch-chain was of plain gold, and his eye-glasses dangled from a neat silk ribbon; his well-gloved hand twirled a hickory walking-stick, ornamented with a silver knob on which a coat-of-arms was engraved.

He took a few steps on the deck, then, leaning over the taffrail, he permitted his eyes to wander toward the pier on which carriages were stationed and where a crowd of idlers had assembled looking anxiously forward to the arrival of the steamer.

A flotilla of small boats had already set out from the pier to storm *The Léopold,* loaded with hotel runners, servants seeking employment, facchini and other rascals of an assorted type who had long since learned to look upon strangers as their natural prey; each rower was doing his utmost to reach the steamer first, and the oarsmen exchanged vile epithets and coarse oaths, calculated to frighten those not acquainted with the habits of the lower class of Neapolitans.

The young man with the auburn hair, in order to see better had placed his eyeglasses on his nose; but his attention, attracted by the concert of yells and shrieks which arose from the flotilla, concentrated itself on the boats; no doubt the noise annoyed him, for his brows contracted, the wrinkle in his forehead grew deeper, and the pupils of his eyes turned from gray to a greenish yellow.

Suddenly a huge, foam-crested wave, rolling in from the open sea, raised the steamer high in the air and rushed on towards the pier, where it dashed itself in its mad fury against the promenaders, who were completely taken by surprise with this unexpected shower-bath; then, rolling backward, it brought a number of the small boats into violent contact, upsetting three or four facchini, who fell headlong into the water. The accident was not serious, as these rascals all swim like fish, and a moment later they reappeared on the surface, their hair matted closely together, and spitting out the salt water by the mouthful. They seemed to be as surprised at this sudden immersion as was Telemachus, the son of Ulysses, when Minerva, in the guise of the wise Mentor, threw him headlong from the summit of a high cliff into the sea to tear him away from the love of Eucharis.

Behind this strange tourist, standing at a respectful distance, alongside a pile of luggage, was a little groom, a species of dried-up-old-man-of-fifteen, a veritable gnome in livery, resembling one of those dwarfs whom Chinese ingenuity alone can produce; his face was as flat as a board, and his nose was scarcely perceptible, looking as if it had been compressed in childhood, while his eyes had that docile expression which certain naturalists claim exists in the toad. No protuberance rounded his shoulders or bulged out his chest; and yet he gave one the impression that he was a hunchback, although it would have been a hard matter to find the hump. In a word, he was a model groom, and he might have presented himself at the Ascot races and at the spring meeting at Chantilly without fear of being too closely scrutinized; any gentleman rider would have accepted his services, notwithstanding his repulsive appearance. He was unattractive, but irreproachable in his way, like his master.

At last the steamer ran up alongside the pier and the passengers went ashore; the porters, after an exchange of gross insults, divided the passengers and the luggage between them, and took the road to the different hotels with which Naples is plentifully supplied.

The traveller with the auburn hair and his groom started for the Hotel de Rome, followed by a phalanx of robust facchini who pretended to perspire and totter beneath the weight of a hat-box or a light parcel, in the hope of receiving an extra large *pourboire,* while four or five of their comrades brought all of their muscles into play as they pushed a wheelbarrow before them containing two ordinary-sized trunks.

When they reached the hotel and the *padron di casa* had designated his apartment to the new arrival, the porters, notwithstanding the fact that they had been paid thrice the value for their services, began to gesticulate wildly and cry out in a half-supplicating, half-threatening manner for a tip. They all talked together and swore by all the saints on the calendar that they had not been sufficiently rewarded for their labor. Paddy, who remained alone to listen to their recriminations—for his master, unheeding the demands and entreaties of the facchini, had already ascended the grand staircase—looked for all the world like a monkey surrounded by a pack of dogs. He attempted to quiet the porters by a bit of a harangue in his own tongue, but, as the English language failed to produce the desired effect, he clinched his fist and, assuming the attitude of a boxer, to the great amusement of the facchini, he suddenly let fly his right in a manner worthy of a Tom Cribbs or a Sawyer, and caught the gigantic leader of the gang full in the pit of the stomach, sending him to mother earth in the most approved fashion.

This exploit routed the rest of the band; the colossus pulled himself together with an effort and rose to his feet, considerably the worse for wear, and skulked away, without even vowing vengeance, rubbing his stomach and thoroughly satisfied that a veritable demon was concealed in the person of that little dog-faced groom whom he had thought he could have knocked over with a whiff of his breath.

The stranger, having sent for the landlord, inquired whether a letter addressed to M. Paul d'Aspremont had not been left at the office for him. The proprietor replied that a letter bearing this name had been awaiting his arrival for over a week, and hastened to bring it up.

The letter, enclosed in a heavy envelope, cream-lead in color, sealed with a bit of blue wax, was written in that peculiar and elegant style of handwriting which denotes the possessor of an excellent education, and which is used to a great extent among the young ladies of the English nobility.

The note, which M. d'Aspremont opened with a haste not prompted by curiosity alone, ran as follows:

"My Dear Monsieur d'Aspremont:—We have been stopping in Naples for the past two months. During the voyage, which was made in short stages, my uncle complained bitterly of the heat, the mosquitoes, the wine, the butter and the beds; he declared that one must be really crazy to abandon a comfortable cottage, within a few miles of London, to travel over dusty roads on which only second-class taverns are to be found, taverns in which an honest English dog would be ashamed to pass a single night; but, in spite of his grumbling, he accompanied me here—just as he would have followed me to the end of the world; he is none the worse for the trip and my health has greatly improved. We have taken up our quarters in a little whitewashed villa near the sea, in a sort of a virgin forest composed of citron and orange trees, myrtle, laurel and rose bushes and other exotic plants. From the summit of the bluff we have a delightful view of the surrounding country, and you will find a cup of tea or an iced lemonade awaiting you any evening you may call. My uncle, whom you have fascinated, I know not how, will be delighted to press your hand. Is it necessary for me to add that your devoted servant would not be sorry to do likewise, although you hurt her fingers with your ring when you bid her adieu on the jetty at Folkestone.

"Alicia W."

Chapter II

A LOOK OF CURIOSITY

Paul d'Aspremont, after dining in his room, ordered a carriage. As there are always a number stationed near the hotels awaiting the call of tourists. Paul's wish was instantly gratified. The hack horses of Naples are so thin, that, if they were placed alongside the famous Parisian *rosse* the latter would be accused of *embonpoint;* their emaciated heads, their ribs looking for all the world like so many barrel staves, their projecting backbones which are always flayed and bleeding, seem to implore the butcher to use his knife to put an end to their torture, for it is regarded as a crime by the Southern Jehu to feed his horses; the harness is considerably the worse for wear and is frequently pieced together with bits of rope, and when the driver gathers up his reins and cracks his whip one would really suppose that the horses would faint and the carriage disappear in smoke, like Cinderella's turnout when she returned from the ball after midnight, against the command of the good fairy. But such is not the case; the nags brace up on their legs, and, after a moment's hesitation, take up a gallop which they never relinquish: the coachman somehow or other imbues them with fresh energy, and he knows how to draw out by a vigorous application of his whip the last spark of life contained in their old carcasses. We will not attempt to explain how it is that these maimed brutes can equal in speed the fastest English trotters, for the feat is beyond our comprehension. But this miracle is of daily occurrence in Naples, and no one seems surprised by the fact.

M. Paul d'Aspremont's carriage dashed through the compact crowd, grazing the acquaiuloi, citron venders' stands, the open-air macaroni shops, and the bazaars in which citruls and other sea-fruits are for sale. The lazzaroni, enveloped in their long, hooded cloaks, dozed on the sidewalk heedless of the passing vehicles. From time to time a carricolo, with its huge red wheels, would dash by, the box-seats occupied by a mass of monks, nurses, facchini and other rascals. The carricoli are almost obsolete at present, and it is against the law to build new ones, but one can put a new box on the old wheels or new wheels on an old box, and in this ingenious manner manage to keep these curious vehicles before the public.

Our traveller paid but little attention to this picturesque and ever-changing panorama, which certainly would have gladdened the heart of any other tourist, unless he, too, was so fortunate as to find a letter signed "Alicia W.," awaiting his arrival at the Hotel de Rome.

But M. d'Aspremont had no eye for all this. He glanced carelessly at the limpid sea with its myriads of islands—even Capri, Ischia, Nisida and Procida failed to arouse his enthusiasm. His eyes were seeking that little white house, surrounded with shrubbery, in the environs of Sorrento, of which Alicia spoke in her letter. At this moment, M. d'Aspremont's countenance had nothing of that disagreeable expression which characterized it when he was displeased; it was really handsome and sympathetic. It was easy to understand that this person of distinction could not fail to please a young English miss, brought up by an indulgent old uncle.

As the driver urged his horses to do their utmost, it did not take long to pass Chiaja and Marinella, and the carriage soon entered the road which is now monopolized by the steam-cars. A thick, black dust, not unlike ground charcoal, gave an almost plutonic aspect to this part of the beach, which is washed by the blue waters of the gulf; it is the soot of Vesuvius, sifted by the wind, which gives this dusky appearance to the sand and causes the houses of Portici and Torre del Greco to resemble the factories of Birmingham. M. d'Aspremont heeded not the contrast between the ebony-hued beach and the sapphire-colored sky—he was in a hurry to arrive at his destination. The most beautiful roads are tediously long when Miss Alicia is awaiting your coming, six months after saying good-bye on the jetty at Folkstone: the sky and the sea of Naples have lost their charm—what are sky and sea to a man of the world, especially when the woman he loves awaits him at the end of the road.

Finally, the carriage enters the private road which leads to the little white house on the hill. A sunburnt servant, with closely matted hair, hurried to open the gate at the approach of the carriage, and, preceding M. d'Aspremont in a path bordered on either side with laurel-rose bushes, conducted him to the terrace where Miss Alicia Ward and her uncle were sipping their afternoon tea.

Through mere caprice, a fault pardonable in a young girl who is *blasée* of all the comforts and attractions of city life —and possibly also to tease her uncle— Miss Alicia had selected this villa in preference to any of the more modern dwellings offered for rent. Its owners were travelling and it had been unoccupied for several years. She found a sort of poetic wildness in this deserted garden, which had almost reverted to its original state, and which, owing to the warm climate, was entirely overrun with orange trees, myrtle, geraniums, and citrons. It was not like in the North, where a deserted house is the most dreary object imaginable, but the wild gaiety of the South left to herself; in the absence of the master, the exuberant vegetation was having a veritable debauch of leaves, flowers, fruits and perfume.

When the Commodore—it was thus that Alicia called her uncle—first saw this impenetrable thicket through which it was impossible to effect a passage without a liberal application of the axe, as in the virgin forests of Central America, he raised his hands to Heaven in horror and declared that his niece had lost her senses. But Alicia promised to have an entrance made from the gate of the salon, and another passage, large enough to permit of the entrance of a barrel of malmsey wine, from the salon to the terrace—but this was the only concession she would accord to her uncle. The Commodore, unable to resist the persuasions of his lovely niece, resigned himself to his fate, and at this moment he was seated opposite her on the terrace, contentedly sipping a big tumbler of rum, which the servants, in their innocence, mistook for English breakfast tea.

As M. d'Aspremont made his appearance on the terrace, Alicia sprang to her feet with a little cry of joyful surprise and ran up to meet him. Paul shook her warmly by the hand, but the young girl suddenly raised the imprisoned hand to the height of her friend's lips with a little movement which was full of playful coquetry.

After a desperate effort, the Commodore finally managed to raise himself on his gouty legs, but it was amusing to behold the expression of joy mingled with pain which spread o'er his countenance as he attempted to walk. However, the old sailor was not to be daunted.

Gritting his teeth, he stepped boldly forward, and approaching the young people, stretched forth his hand to Paul as he gave him a hearty welcome.

Miss Alicia Ward was one of those charming women in whom the commingling of the dark and blonde types produces an ideal beauty; her full lips were red as cherries, while her shining hair was dark as a raven's wing, in direct contrast with her complexion, which challenged comparison with that "whiteness of the lily, and clearness of alabaster" in which a poet delights when singing the praises of the mistress of his heart. The effect of this is irresistible, and produces a peculiar style of beauty not to be found elsewhere.

Perhaps the harems of the East contain fair Circassians of a like complexion, if we can believe the flowery extravagance of Eastern poets, or the aquarelles of Lewis, representing scenes in the seraglio.

Alicia was certainly a perfect type of this class of beauty. Her oval face, pure complexion, delicate nose and transparent nostrils, her deep blue eyes fringed with long, dark lashes which hovered on her cheeks like black butterflies when she lowered her eyes; her hair falling in brilliant masses like satin ribbons down her swan-like neck, and clinging about her face, proved the possibility of Maclise's romantic figures which are usually held to be but dreams.

She wore a dress of grenadine, embroidered with red palm-leaves, which accorded well with the strings of coral which were woven in her hair and encircled her throat and arms; from her delicate shell-like ears hung pendants formed of numerous small pieces of coral deftly strung together. If the reader blame this abuse of coral, remember that we are in Naples, where the fishermen go down to the bottom of the sea only to find these wonderful branches which blush like a maiden when exposed to the sunlight.

After the portrait of Miss Alicia Ward, we feel obliged to give, by way of contrast, a caricature, *à la* Hogarth, of her uncle, the Commodore. He was about sixty years old, and his face was a dark purple, contrasting strongly with his white eyebrows and mutton-chop whiskers, which were sharply defined, and gave him the appearance of an old Indian who had decorated his face with white paint. The warm Italian sun had still further deepened this violet color, and the Commodore made one think involuntarily of a large burnt almond packed in cotton. He was dressed from top to toe in a suit of grayish-brown tweed, with gaiters to match, which his tailor had assured him, on his word of honor, was the latest and most fashionable color, which probably was true. Notwithstanding his inflamed complexion and grotesque costume, the Commodore looked above the common herd. His scrupulous neatness, noble bearing and courtly manners bespoke the perfect gentleman, although he certainly looked like one of the caricatures in Hoffman's or Levasser's comedies. His only occupation was to adore his niece and to drink an enormous quantity of Jamaica rum, to preserve the radical humidity, after the style of Corporal Trim.

"See how well I am looking and how pretty I am! Look at my rosy color—I am not as red as uncle, it is true, but then I never touch Jamaica rum or old London Dock—and yet my cheeks are red, most decidedly red," exclaimed Alicia, as she tapped her face with her tapering, well-shaped finger: "I have grown stout, too, and there are no longer any of those horrid circles under my eyes like there used to be when I wanted to look my prettiest at a ball. I say, Paul, I must be indeed a great coquette to deprive myself of the company of my *fiancé* during three long months, so that he will find me looking all the fresher and prettier after the separation!"

And, as she gave vent to this little outburst of feeling, Alicia stood up on her tip-toes as if to provoke Paul and defy his examination.

"Isn't she as strong and hearty as those Procida girls who carry Grecian amphoras on their heads?" interrupted the Commodore.

"Pardon me, Commodore," answered Paul; "Miss Alicia has not grown prettier, that would be impossible; but she is in decidedly better health than when she imposed this cruel separation upon me out of mere caprice—or coquetry, as she pretends."

And he turned his eyes full upon the young girl who stood before him.

Suddenly, the rosy hue, of which but a moment before she seemed so proud, disappeared from Alicia's cheeks, and she carried her hand to her heart with a movement of pain.

Paul, thoroughly alarmed, rose to his feet; the Commodore did likewise. The bright color suddenly reappeared in Alicia's cheeks as she smilingly remarked:

"I promised you a cup of tea or a sorbet, and, although English, I recommend the sorbet. The snow is preferable to hot water in this clime, where the African sirocco visits us almost daily."

They seated themselves around the little stone table; the sun had sunk beneath the horizon, and the soft twilight of the Neapolitan night succeeded the glaring light of day. The rising moon gave a silvery tint to the surrounding foliage; the sea broke upon the pebbly beach with a gentle murmur, and in the distance the beating of drums could be plainly heard as the guards were relieved for the night.

At last they were obliged to part; Nicè, the fawn-colored servant with the matted hair, conducted Paul to the gate, lighting the way with a torch. While she was serving the tea and the sorbets she had fastened a look of curiosity, mingled with fear, on the new arrival. No doubt the result of her examination was unfavorable to Paul, for Nicè's brow, yellow as a cigar already, gathered itself up into innumerable wrinkles, and, as she accompanied the stranger, she secretly pointed her little finger at him, and crossed her three other fingers over her thumb, as if to form some cabalistic sign.

Chapter III

PAUL'S DEPARTURE

Paul returned to the Hotel de Rome by the same road; the beauty of the night was incomparable; the moon reflected her silver rays on the waves, which, as they broke gently upon the beach, seemed to burst into myriads of glittering sparks. The fishing-smacks, carrying a lighted torch in the prow, skimmed over the surface of the sea, leaving a silvery trail in their wake; the smoke of Vesuvius, white in the daylight, was now a glistening column of fire which reflected strangely on the waters of the gulf.

A few strolling lazzaroni were reclining on the sands, deeply moved without knowing it at this magical spectacle, as they gazed long and earnestly into the limpid waters of the bay. Others, seated on the deck of a bark at anchor, were either singing an air from *Lucia* or the romanza so popular at the time: *"Ti voglio ben' assai,"* in a voice of which many a tenor might well be envious. Naples, like all other Southern cities, retires late; however, the lights in the windows gradually disappeared, one by one, but the lottery offices, with their garlands of paper flowers and their favorite numbers gaily illuminated, were still open in the hope that the few passers-by would come in and put a few carlins or a couple of ducats on some pet number on their way home.

Paul went right to bed, and, drawing the mosquito netting tightly about him, was soon fast asleep. Like most travellers after a sea voyage, his couch, although perfectly stationary, appeared to roll and plunge as if the Hotel de Rome had been the *Leopold*. Under this impression he dreamed that he was still at sea, and he saw Alicia standing on the jetty, pale as death, alongside of her red-faced uncle, who was making desperate signs for him not to come ashore; the young girl's face expressed profound grief, and in motioning him away she seemed to obey a mysterious impulse in spite of herself.

Paul now awoke with a start; this dream strangely affected him, and he was ashamed to find that he was in the hotel instead of at sea, with the *veilleuse* burning brightly alongside the bed and attracting all the mosquitoes in the room. In order not to fall back into this painful slumber, Paul struggled against the feeling of drowsiness which almost overpowered him, and began to recall his courtship of Alicia.

In his fancy he once more beheld the red-brick house, covered with vines of honeysuckle and lilac, which Alicia and her uncle inhabited in Richmond, when he met them on the occasion of his first trip to England, having presented one of those letters of introduction which invariably result in an invitation to dinner. He remembered the white India muslin dress, ornamented with a simple ribbon which Alicia, just home from boarding-school, wore that day, and the branch of jasmine which entwined itself in her coal-black hair like a flower in Ophelia's crown; her beautiful blue eyes and partly opened lips, exposing a row of enamelled teeth. He recalled to mind the deep blush which rose to her cheeks when the young French gentleman's eyes met hers.

The parlor, draped in sombre green and decorated with engravings of fox-hunts and steeple-chases, was reproduced in his mind as in a camera obscura. The piano stretched forth its row of keys like the teeth in the jaw of an alligator; the mantelpiece, decorated with a sprig of Irish shamrock, and its highly polished grate; the old oak arm-chairs, the carpet strewn with roses, and Miss Alicia, trembling like a leaf, singing the romanza from *Anna Bolena*, *"deh, non voler costringere,"* most delightfully out of tune, while Paul accompanied her on the piano, and the Commodore, overcome with an attack of indigestion and, if possible, more crimson than usual, dropped the colossal supplement of the London *Times* as he fell into a quiet doze.

Then the scene changed. Paul, now on most intimate terms, had been invited by the Commodore to visit him at his country home in Lincolnshire—an old, feudal castle, with crenellated turrets and ivy-colored Gothic windows, but furnished in the most approved modern style. It rose at the end of a large, well-kept lawn, surrounded by a gravel path serving as a riding school for Miss Alicia, who rode one of those little Shetland ponies with flowing mane, which Sir Edwin Landseer loves to paint. Paul, mounted on a gray hunter kindly loaned him by the Commodore, accompanied Miss Ward on her daily rides, as the doctor, finding her somewhat broken down in health, had recommended plenty of exercise.

Again, a little canoe was gliding along the lake, displacing the water-lilies, and making the kingfishers beat a hasty retreat. Alicia rowed while Paul held the tiller ropes. How beautiful she looked in her straw hat, the golden halo of the noonday sun surrounding her pretty head!

The Commodore remained on shore, not on account of his dignity, but owing to his weight, which would have caused the little boat to founder; he awaited the arrival of his niece on the embankment, and threw a wrap over her shoulders, with almost motherly care, for fear she would take cold; then, after hauling the boat up high and dry, they would return to the cottage for luncheon. Alicia, who at other times ate no more than a bird, now thoroughly enjoyed a slice of York ham, cut thin as a wafer, while she munched away at her hot biscuits without ever giving a crumb to the gold-fishes which disported themselves in a huge globe suspended by a chain from the ceiling.

But those happy days could not last forever. Paul postponed his departure by several weeks, and already signs of fall were beginning to make their appearance.

Alicia grew pale under the anxious eye of her lover, and the only color she retained were two bright spots near the temples. She was subject to chills, and the biggest fire was not sufficient to warm her. The doctor finally decided, as a last resource, that Miss Ward should pass the winter at Pisa and the spring in Naples.

Important family affairs recalled Paul to France: Alicia and the Commodore were ready to start for Italy, and the separation took place at Folkestone. Not a word on the subject had been spoken, but Miss Ward looked upon Paul as her betrothed, and the Commodore had pressed the young man's hands significantly; one only squeezes the hand of a son-in-law in so forcible a manner.

After an absence of six months, Paul was overjoyed to find Alicia looking strong and healthy. The young girl was now a young woman, and he reasoned that the Commodore could not offer any objection when he asked for the hand of his niece in marriage.

Rocked to sleep with these pleasant thoughts he dropped off into a gentle slumber, from which he was aroused only at daybreak. Naples had already begun her noisy clatter: the venders of iced-water were crying out their wares for sale; the cooks offered the passers-by tempting morsels of roast beef for a mere song, while the lazy housewives were lowering down their baskets by the aid of a string, which they hauled up a moment later filled with tomatoes, fish, and large pieces of pumpkin. The notaries, dressed in seedy black, seated themselves at their stands as they placed their pen behind their ears; the money changers displayed little piles of gold and silver on their tables; while the coachmen galloped their living boneyards, soliciting an early patronage as the bells in all the steeples merrily chimed out the *Angelus*.

Our traveller, enveloped in his dressing-gown, leaned out of the window; from where he could plainly see Santa-Lucia and the fortress of Œuf, while an immense stretch of sea, reaching from Vesuvius to the huge promontory of

Castellamare and the villas of Sorrento, unrolled itself before his eyes.

The sky was clear, but a white cloud was rapidly approaching the city, impelled by a gentle breeze. As Paul fixed his eyes upon this cloud, that peculiar expression came over his face, and his eyebrows contracted as the frown grew more pronounced. Other vapors joined this single cloud, and soon a heavy curtain hung over the Château of Saint Elmo. Large drops began to fall on the lava pavement, and soon one of those terrific rain storms for which Naples is noted burst upon the city, carrying dogs and even donkeys into the sewers before it. The crowd, taken by surprise, dispersed, seeking shelter wherever they could find it; the open-air stores shut up shop in no time, and the rain, now mistress of the situation, swept across the quay of Santa Lucia from end to end.

The gigantic facchino to whom Paddy had applied such a vigorous thrashing was leaning against the column of a building, directly opposite the window at which Paul d'Aspremont was standing.

As he caught sight of the face at the window the Neapolitan muttered in an irritated tone:

"The captain of the *Leopold* would have done well to throw that *unbeliever* overboard," and, passing his hand under his coarse linen blouse, he touched a bunch of amulets which was suspended around his neck.

Chapter IV

AN ELEGANT NEAPOLITAN

The sun soon shone forth brightly, and it was not long before the streets were dry and filled with people. But Timberio, the porter, nevertheless retained the opinion he had formed regarding the young Frenchman, and he prudently withdrew out of range of the window: some of the other lazzaroni evinced their surprise that he should abandon such an excellent station.

"Whoever wants the place is welcome to it," he replied, as he shook his head in a mysterious manner. "I know what I am talking about."

Paul breakfasted in his room; whether he was bashful, or whether it was because he disliked to be among strangers, he never took his meals in public. Then he dressed himself and, in awaiting the hour for his call on Miss Ward, he visited the Museum of Studj: in an absent-minded way he admired the precious collection of antique vases, bronzes unearthed among the ruins of Pompeii. the helmet of Grecian brass, all covered with verdigris, in which reposed the head of the soldier who wore it ages ago, the bit of hardened earth retaining, as in a cast, the impression of the figure of a young woman surprised by the eruption in the summer residence of Arrius Diomedès, and the beautiful statue of Aristides, the choicest and possibly the most perfect morsel left us of a forgotten era. But a lover is not an enthusiastic admirer of art; in his eyes the profile of the adored one is worth more than all the Greek and Roman statues in the world.

After whiling away two or three hours at the Studj, he entered a carriage and directed the driver to proceed at once to the little villa near Sorrento where Miss Ward resided. The driver, with the intelligence which characterizes all Southern people, divined that the gentleman was in a hurry, so whipping up his tired horses he soon drove up to the villa. The same servant opened the gate. She was dressed as before, with the exception that her legs were entirely devoid of covering and that a little bunch of horns and coral charms was suspended around her neck.

Miss Alicia was reclining in an Indian hammock on the terrace, dressed in a light china-silk wrapper. Her feet, which were plainly visible through the netting of the hammock, were encased in a pair of loose sandals, and her bare arms were crossed above her head, in Cleopatra's favorite attitude.

The Commodore, dressed in a suit of white duck, was seated in a bamboo chair, and from time to time he pulled the rope which set the hammock in motion.

A third personage completed the group: it was the Comte d'Altavilla, a young and elegant Neapolitan, whose presence brought to Paul's face that peculiar contraction of the features which gave it such a diabolical expression.

In fact, the Comte was one of those men one does not care to see beside his lady-love. He was unusually tall, although splendidly proportioned; his hair was as black as jet, and was arranged in graceful curls around the temples; a spark of Southern fire scintillated in his eyes; and his large, white teeth appeared still whiter owing to his red lips and the dark olive color of his complexion. The only fault a critic could possibly have brought to bear against the Comte was that he was too handsome.

As to his clothes d'Altavilla had them all imported from London, and the most pronounced dandy would have approved of his attire. There was nothing at all Italian in his dress with the exception of his shirt-studs, which were of great value. Here the love of all sons of the South for jewelry betrayed itself. He also wore a little bunch of coral charms on his watch-chain, but a tour of inspection among the promenaders in the Rue de Tolède or at the Villa Reale would have sufficed to convince the most incredulous that there was nothing at all eccentric about him.

As Paul d'Aspremont entered, the Comte, at Miss Ward's urgent request, was singing some delightful Neapolitan melodies. Those who have not heard one of these charming romanzas of Gordigiani's, as sung by a lazzarone at Chiaja, or a sailor on the jetty, as he returns from his work, have missed the breath of a lifetime. They are composed of a breath of air, of a ray of moonshine, of the perfume of an orange-grove, and of the throbbing of a heart.

Alicia, with her pretty English voice, a trifle out of tune, hummed the air which she wished to remember, as she nodded a welcome to Paul, who was looking at her in anything but a pleasant manner, being annoyed at the presence of this handsome young man.

One of the ropes of the hammock suddenly parted, and Miss Ward slipped to the ground, without injuring herself, however. Six ready hands were simultaneously extended toward her, but the young girl was already on her feet, blushing furiously, for it is considered *improper* for a woman to fall in the presence of men.

"I can't understand it; I tried every one of those ropes myself," exclaimed the Commodore, "and Miss Ward doesn't weigh any more than a humming bird."

The Comte d'Altavilla shook his head in a mysterious manner: in the breaking of the rope he evidently saw another reason besides weight; but, man of the world as he was, he kept his opinion to himself, while he carelessly toyed with the charms on his watch chain.

Like all men who become surly and disagreeable in the presence of a rival whom they consider worthy of their steel, instead of assuming to be all grace and amiability, Paul d'Aspremont, although well versed in the customs of polite society, did not succeed in concealing his ill-humor; he only replied by monosyllables, permitting the conversation to drag, and whenever he glanced towards d'Altavilla his eyes assumed their peculiar expression; the yellow fibres shot forth beneath the gray transparency of his eyeballs like so many water-snakes in the bottom of a well.

Every time that Paul looked at him thus, the Comte, seemingly by a mechanical movement, plucked a flower from the *jardinière* and flung it from him so as to ward off the magnetism of the former's angry glance.

"What ails you that you should vent your spite on my *jardinière?*" exclaimed Miss Ward, as she suddenly noticed the number of plants the Comte had destroyed. "What have my flowers done to you that you should wage war upon them?"

"Oh! it is nothing, Miss Alicia; merely a nervous tic," replied d'Altavilla, as he decapitated a superb rose with his finger-nail and sent it to join the other flowers on the terrace.

"Well, then, you annoy me very much," said Alicia; "and without knowing it, you have upset one of my pet theories. I have never plucked a flower in all my life. Bouquets inspire me with a feeling of horror: to me they are dead flowers, mere cadavers of roses, full of worms and periwinkles, and the odor of which has something positively sepulchral."

"To atone for the murder I have just committed," said the Comte d'Altavilla, bowing politely, "I will send you a hundred baskets of flowers in full bloom."

Paul had risen; he toyed with his hat as if he contemplated taking his departure.

"What! going already?" exclaimed Miss Ward.

"I have some letters to write—some very important letters."

"Oh! what a story!" remarked the young girl with a pretty pout; "how can you have important letters to write when I am here to listen to what you have to say in person?"

"Why don't you stay, Paul?" put in the Commodore; "I had arranged a little programme for this evening, and I only await the sanction of my niece to put it into execution: in the first place we would go to the fountain of Santa-Lucia, where we would have partaken of a glass of water which smells of rotten eggs, but which is a great appetizer, nevertheless; then we would have eaten a dozen or two of white and pink oysters, at the fish-market, dined under a vine arbor in some Neapolitan tavern, drunk chianti and lacryma-christi, and wound up the evening with a visit to Seigneur Pulcinella. The Comte would have explained all the jokes and the native dialect."

This proposition evidently did not please M' d'Aspremont, and he retired after bowing coldly.

D'Altavilla remained a few moments

longer: and as Miss Ward, vexed at Paul's sudden departure, did not enter into the spirit of the excursion proposed by the Commodore, he also took his leave.

Two hours later Miss Alicia received a large number of rare plants, but what surprised her most was an enormous pair of Sicilian bull's horns, transparent as amber, and polished like agate, measuring at least three feet, and tipped at the ends with threatening black points. A magnificent gilt bronze shield accompanied the horns, evidently designed to support them.

Vicè, who had assisted the porters to unpack the flowers and the horns, seemed to understand the motive which prompted the Comte to make such a strange gift.

She placed them on the stone table and, as they rested there, one might well have supposed that they had been torn from the front of the divine bull which carried Europa on his mighty head. Then, after a long and silent contemplation, she remarked:

"We are now prepared to defend ourselves at least."

"What do you mean, Vicè?" questioned Miss Ward.

"Nothing—but the French signor has very strange eyes!"

CHAPTER V

THE FACCHINO

THE hour for dinner had long since passed, and the fires of hot coals, which, during the day, make a miniature Vesuvius in the kitchen of the Hotel de Rome, were slowly dying out; the pots and the pans had resumed their places on their respective nails, and shone in the semi-darkness like so many ancient breast-plates; a copper lamp, not unlike those unearthed at Pompeii, was suspended from the main rafter of the room by a triple chain, its three wicks lighting up the centre of the kitchen, the remainder being plunged in total darkness.

Its dull rays illuminated the countenances of an ill-assorted group—a group which would have furnished plenty of material for the brushes of an Espagnolet or a Salvator Rosa as it sat there in the semi-darkness around the chopped-up table. In the first place there was the *chef,* Virgilio Falsacappa, a very important personage—in his own estimation. He was of gigantic stature and formidable *embonpoint;* in fact, he might have passed for one of the guests at Vitellius' banquet, if he had been attired in a Roman toga instead of a white apron. His features were strongly marked and resembled the profile of those curious heads stamped on ancient coins; coarse, black eyebrows, half an inch thick, surmounted a pair of almond-shaped eyes; an enormous nose cast its shadow o'er a tremendous mouth, resembling the jaw of a shark with its double row of large teeth. Bunchy side-whiskers encircled his dark visage, while his glossy, black hair, tinged with a few silver threads, fell in short ringlets on his colossal and bloated neck. His jaw seemed capable of crunching the bones of an ox, and the silver crescents he wore in his ears were as large as a new moon. This is master Virgilio Falsacappa, who, with his apron tucked under his belt, and his knife plunged in a wooden sheath, resembled an old-time *victimarius* far more than a modern *chef.*

Then there was Timberio, the porter, who was in a state of extreme emaciation, thanks to his gymnastic calling and to the frugal diet of a handful of half-cooked macaroni, seasoned with caciocavallo, a slice of watermelon and a glass of snow water, which were the only victuals his meagre purse would allow. Had he received proper nourishment there is no doubt he would have equalled in size, if not in *embonpoint,* Virgilio Falsacappa. The only garments he wore were a pair of linen drawers, a long calico waistcoat, and a coarse cloak which was thrown across his shoulders in a careless manner.

Scazziga, the proud owner of the carriage M. Paul d'Aspremont had hired to go to Sorrento, was leaning against the table; he, too, presented a striking appearance: his irregular features wore a cunning expression, and a sarcastic smile was constantly playing about his lips. It was easy to see that he had been thrown in contact with people of more or less distinction, for his every movement was an imitation of the gestures and mannerisms he had noted among his superiors. His clothing, purchased in some second-hand store, consisted of a semi-livery, semi-civilian attire, of which he was very proud, and which, in his opinion, was not to be compared with Timberio's cheap get-up; his conversation was replete with English and French words which at times failed to express the meaning of what he wished to convey, but which raised him high in the estimation of the kitchen maids and the pot-boys, who were surprised at such a wonderful display of knowledge.

Two young servants, whose features recalled that type of beauty so common on Syracusan moneys, were standing a little in the rear—low forehead, commingling with the brow, rather thick lips, strong and well-defined chin; the braids of bluish-black hair being fastened into a heavy coil, pierced with coral-mounted pins, while three rows of coral beads encircled their muscular necks. A dandy would have scorned to notice these poor girls whose red Grecian blood was free of all foreign taint, but an artist would have pulled out his sketch-book and sharpened his pencil with alacrity.

Have you ever seen that picture by Murillo in Marechal Soult's gallery, representing a group of little cupids as they disport themselves about the kitchen fire? For if you have, it will spare us the trouble of painting the heads of the three or four curly-headed pot-boys who completed the group.

This trio, surrounded by the pot-boys and the scullion maids, were discussing a serious question. They were talking of M. Paul d'Aspremont, the young French traveller, who had arrived by the last steamer. Those in the kitchen considered it their duty to criticise their betters.

Timberio had the floor, and he rested between every sentence to note the effect produced on his audience.

"Now I want you to carefully note what I have to say," began the orator; "the *Leopold* is an honest craft, flying the flag of Tuscany. The only fault to be found against her is that she transports too many English heretics—"

"The English heretics pay well, however," interrupted Scazziga, who had received many a tip from the British tourists.

"Undoubtedly; but then the best thing a heretic can do is to pay a Christian liberally to compensate him for the disgrace of serving an unbeliever."

"I don't consider it a disgrace at all to drive a heretic in my carriage; I don't make a pack-horse of myself like you, Timberio, any way."

"Was I not baptized just the same as you?" retorted the porter, with an angry scowl as he doubled up his fists.

"Let Timberio have his say!" cried out the others as in one voice, fearing that these personal recriminations would wind up in a scuffle.

"You will agree," continued the orator, thoroughly pacified as he knew popular favor was on his side, "that the weather was superb when the *Leopold* entered port?"

"We admit all that, Timberio," remarked the *chef*, as he waved his hand majestically in token of acquiescence.

"The sea was as smooth as glass," continued the facchino, "and yet an enormous wave suddenly came up and upset Gennaro's bark, spilling the captain and three of his men into the water. Now, I ask you, is this natural? Gennaro is a regular sea-dog; he could dance the tarentella on the crest of a wave without a balancing pole, and yet his bark is upset in a dead calm."

"He may have drunk a flask of asprimo too much," objected Scazziga, the rationalist of the assembly.

"Not even a glass of lemonade," Timberio hastened to reply; "but a gentleman on board the steamer looked at him in a peculiar manner—do you hear?"

"Oh, perfectly!" replied the chorus, extending their middle and little fingers as if moved by a string.

"And this gentlemen." added Timberio, "was no other but M. Paul d'Aspremont."

"The guest who occupies number 3?" inquired the *chef;* "the one who takes his meals in his room?"

"Precisely," replied the youngest and the prettiest of the servants; "I have never seen such a disagreeable or such a surly traveller before; he would not even give me a look, or say a single word, and yet all the tourists who stop here say I deserve a compliment even if I do not deserve a tip."

"You deserve more than that, Gelsomina, my love," gallantly remarked Timberio; "but it is fortunate indeed that the stranger did not notice you."

"How superstitious you are, to be sure," objected Scazziga, whom constant association with foreigners had made more or less sceptical.

"If you keep on associating with heretics you will wind up by no longer believing in Saint Januarius himself."

"If Gennaro was so clumsy as to fall overboard, that is no reason why M. Paul d'Aspremont should possess the evil influence you attribute to him," continued Scazziga, defending his customer.

"I will give you other proof: this morning I saw him standing near the window, his eye fixed on a little cloud no larger than Gelsomina's cap, and a moment later a mass of thick vapors gathered over the city and the rain came down so hard that the dogs could drink out of the gutter without stooping."

Scazziga was as doubtful as ever, and he shook his head as if to say that he didn't credit Timberio's idle fears in the least.

"Besides, the valet is not worth any more than the master," continued the latter; "and I am sure the little hump-backed monkey must be in league with the devil to be able to overthrow me—Timberio—who could knock him over with the flat of my hand!"

"I share Timberio's opinions," chimed in the *chef* in a patronizing sort of way; "the stranger eats but little; he sent back some fried chicken and some macaroni I had prepared with my own hands! Some mysterious secret is hidden beneath this abstinence. Why should a rich man deprive himself of the good things of this world in order to partake of a bouillon and a slice of cold meat?"

"He has red hair," said Gelsomina, as she passed her hand through her long curls.

"And projecting eyes," added Pepina, the other servant.

"Very close to his nose," insisted Timberio.

"And the wrinkle which assumes the form of a horse-shoe between his eye-glasses," remarked the formidable Virgilio Falsacappa; "therefore he is a—"

"Do not pronounce the name, it is unnecessary," they all exclaimed with the exception of Scazziga; "we will be on our guard."

"It makes my blood boil when I think that the police would arrest me if, by accident, I let a three-hundred-pound trunk fall on the head of this unbeliever—of this forerunner of danger," raved Timberio, bringing his fist down upon the table in his rage.

"Scazziga must be plucky to drive him," now ventured Gelsomina.

"I am on my box, he can only see my back, so his eyes can't fix themselves upon mine in the right angle. Besides, I don't bother my head about all this humbug!"

"You have no faith, Scazziga," said Palforio, the colossal pastry-cook; "you will come to a bad end."

While he was thus being discussed in the kitchen of the Hotel de Rome, Paul, whom the presence of the Comte d'Altavilla at Miss Ward's had put in a bad humor, had gone for a stroll in the Villa Reale; and the wrinkle in his forehead grew larger and his eyes assumed their queer expression more than once as he walked up and down the lava pavement. At one moment he thought he saw Alicia and the Comte driving by in a carriage; he rushed up to the vehicle and peered through the open window, but it was not Alicia—only a woman who resembled her slightly at a distance. However, the horses, taking fright at Paul's sudden appearance, ran off, almost upsetting the carriage.

Paul took an ice in the Café de l'Europe: a number of persons examined him attentively and then changed their seats, nodding their heads in a knowing manner.

He entered the theatre of Pulcinella, where they were giving a *tutto da ridere*. The principal actor forgot his lines; after a moment's hesitation, however, he went on with his part; but in the last act of the pantomime his false nose fell off, and, when he attempted to apologize and explain the cause of his misfortunes his tongue suddenly refused to move, as Paul's eyes fastened themselves upon his and deprived him of the power of speech.

Those who were seated near Paul rose in a body and changed their stalls. M. d'Aspremont rose to go, without having noticed the strange effect his presence had produced; while in the lobby h heard the spectators whisper to one another as he passed by:

"A jettatore! A jettatore!"

CHAPTER VI

THE EVIL EYE

THE day after he had sent the horns, Comte d'Altavilla called upon Miss Ward. The young girl was taking afternoon tea in company with her uncle, precisely as if she had been in a red-brick house at Ramsgate, instead of on a plastered terrace in Naples, surrounded by cactus, fig-trees and aloes. It is a characteristic peculiarity of the Saxon race, never to adapt its insular habits to novel surroundings.

The Commodore was in unusual good humor. By means of a chemical apparatus he had succeeded in turning out a cake of ice, and, in this manner, had continued to keep his butter solid. He was buttering a slice of bread with great gusto, preparatory to transforming it into a sandwich.

After the formalities of a first greeting, Alicia, unmindful of the abrupt manner in which it was done, suddenly changed the conversation, and turning towards the young Neapolitan Comte, asked:

"What is the significance of the strange gift which accompanied your flowers? Vicè, my servant, pretends that it is a talisman against the *fascino;* but this is all the satisfaction she would give me."

"Vicè is very sensible," replied the Comte Altavilla, bowing politely.

"But what is the *fascino?*" continued the young lady; "I am not very well acquainted with your African superstitions—for I presume the word designates some popular belief?"

"The *fascino* is the pernicious influence exercised by those who possess—or rather those who are afflicted—with the evil eye."

"Pardon me," remarked Miss Ward, "but I really do not understand you; the meaning of *the evil eye* is as mysterious to me as that of *fascino.*"

"I will attempt to explain to the best of my ability," replied d'Altavilla; "but, as you are sceptical like all Englishwomen, I presume you will at once jump at the conclusion that I am a savage and that my clothes conceal a skin tattooed in blue and red. I am, however, perfectly civilized; I was educated in Paris, and I speak both French and English; I have read Voltaire; I believe in telegraphy, electricity and railroads; I eat macaroni with a fork, and I wear three different pairs of gloves every day."

The Commodore, who was busily engaged in buttering his second sandwich, was now all attention, his curiosity having been aroused by d'Altavilla's strange introduction.

"Now that you have showed yourself in your true colors," laughingly remarked Miss Ward, "I would be sceptical indeed were I to suspect you of *barbarism.* But that which you wish to explain must indeed be either very terrible or very ridiculous or you would not beat about the bush in this way—"

"Yes, it is very terrible, and, as you say very ridiculous," continued the Comte; "and if I were in Paris or London I might possibly share your mirth and laugh with you, but here, in Naples—"

"It is far more serious; and, I suppose, you cannot even smile?"

"Precisely."

"Then kindly enlighten me as to the meaning of *fascino,*" said Miss Ward, who was impressed by the Neapolitan's determined manner.

"This superstition is as old as the world. It is alluded to in the Bible; Virgil speaks of it in most decided terms, and the bronze medals found at Pompeii and Herculaneum, and the unmistakable signs on the walls of the unearthed houses clearly prove how universal this *superstition* was. The people of the East still believe in it at the present day. Red and green bands are painted on the side of Moorish buildings in order to protect the inhabitants from the evil spirit. A sculptured hand is plainly seen on the door of Judgment of the Alhambra. All this certainly denotes the antiquity of the superstition, even if it has no foundation. When millions of men have shared this opinion during thousands of years, it stands to reason that such a general belief must be founded on actual facts and a succession of actual events. I scarcely imagine that the eminent *savants* who have written treatises on the subject, would have made known their opinions to the world unless they had positive facts with which to prove their assertions."

"Your argument is certainly open to criticism," interrupted Miss Ward; "for polytheism was Homer's, Plato's, Aristotle's and Socrates' religion. The latter even went so far as to sacrifice a rooster to Esculapius."

"I admit all that, but at the present time no one sacrifices bullocks to Jupiter."

"I should hope not!" interrupted the Commodore; "they are sensible enough to serve them up as rump and beefsteaks, instead of wasting them upon the desert air!"

"No one offers doves to Venus, peacocks to Juno, or goats to Bacchus; Christianity has replaced the poetic dreams of Greek mythology; truth has triumphed over superstition, and still there are thousands of people who dread the fatal effects of the *fascino,* or to give it the popular name, the *jettatura.*"

"I can readily understand that people of low origin should permit themselves to be influenced by this idle superstition, but I cannot imagine how a man of your education and position can place faith in such nonsense," remarked Miss Ward.

"More than one man of high standing hangs a pair of horns over his window," continued the Comte, "and nails a sacrifice over his door, while he never ventures forth without being covered with amulets and charms; and I admit that, whenever I meet a *jettatore* I hurry across the street, and, if I cannot avoid his glance, I do not hesitate to make the sign of the cross, as any lazzarone would do; and I flatter myself that I have escaped their fatal influence, thanks to this precaution."

Miss Ward was a Protestant, brought up with liberal ideas, and she was not accustomed to believe anything which had not been explained to her entire satisfaction. The Comte's eloquence surprised her. At first she supposed he was only jesting, but his earnest manner and the calm conviction with which he spoke soon caused her to change her views.

"I will admit the existence of this superstition," she replied; "I also believe you are sincere in your fear of the evil eye and that you are not trying to work on the fears of a poor stranger; but kindly give me some positive proof of the existence of this superstition, for, though you may think me devoid of poetic feeling, I assure you that I am very incredulous, and whatever is mysterious, inexplicable, or occult impresses me very little."

"You will not deny, Miss Alicia," continued the Comte, "the power of the human eye; in it the light of heaven combines with the reflection of the soul; the eye-ball is a lens which concentrates the rays of life and the intellect reflects itself in it as in a mirror. A woman's loving glance softens the hardest heart; a hero's glance arouses the enthusiasm of an army, and the glance of a physician calms the madman like a shower of cold water. A mother's look will even make a lion recoil before her."

"You plead your cause with so much eloquence," interrupted Miss Ward, "that you must pardon me if I am still doubtful."

"And the bird, which, palpitating with fear and uttering plaintive cries, descends from the topmost branch of a tree, from whence it could easily have flown away, to throw itself into the open mouth of the serpent that has charmed it, is certainly not moved by superstition, as it is not probable that the mothers entertain their young with stories of the jettatura as they sit aloft in their little nests. Then, again, are the miasmas of typhoid fever, of that pest, cholera, visible? No mortal eye can perceive the electric fluid as it runs down the lightning-rod, and yet it attracts the lightning!"

"It strikes me that the Comte's theory is not so untenable after all," interrupted the Commodore; "I never could look at a toad's golden eyes without feeling revulsion; it acts on me exactly as if I had taken an emetic; and yet the miserable reptile had more to fear than I, who could have crushed it beneath the heel of my boot."

"Oh, uncle! if you take side with M. d'Altavilla I shall have to acknowledge myself defeated," exclaimed Miss Ward. "I am not strong enough to struggle against such opposition. Although I might have many objections to raise against this ocular electricity, on the grounds that no physician has ever mentioned it in his thesis, still I am willing to admit its existence; but will you please inform me what power the pair of horns you so kindly sent me, have to divert the fatal effects of the *fascino*, or *jettatura*, as you call it?"

"On the same principle that the point of the lightning-rod attracts the lightning," answered d'Altavilla; "the sharp points of the horns on which the *jettatore* fixes his eyes will divert the fatal fluid. An outstretched hand or a bunch of coral charms has the same effect."

"All this is very stupid, Monsieur le Comte," remarked Miss Ward; "you evidently desire to impress me with the idea that I am under the influence of some dangerous *fascino* or *jettatore*, and you have sent me the horns in order to divert their fatal influence."

"I fear you have guessed the truth, Miss Alicia," replied the Comte earnestly.

"I'd like to see one of those goggle-eyed fellows trying to charm my niece!"

exclaimed the Commodore, bolting his third sandwich. "Although I have passed my sixtieth year, I haven't quite forgotten how to use my fists," and he doubled up his digits, firmly pressing his thumb against his doubled fingers.

"Two fingers are sufficient, my lord," said d'Altavilla, as he showed the Commodore how to keep away the evil spirit in the most approved Neapolitan style. "As a rule, the *jettatura* is practised involuntarily; it is only exercised by those who possess the fatal power, and frequently when the *jettatori* realize their terrible affliction, they deplore the effects even more than others; we should, therefore, avoid these unhappy beings, but not persecute them. Besides, one can neutralize their fatal influence with a pair of horns, outstretched fingers, or a bunch of coral charms."

"It is really very curious," said the Commodore, who was partly convinced by d'Altavilla's impressive calmness.

"I did not know that I came so constantly in contact with these *jettatori*. I rarely leave this terrace unless it is to take a drive along the Villa Reale with my uncle, and I have never noticed anything like what you have described," said the young girl, whose curiosity was now aroused, although she was still as doubtful as before. "Of whom are you suspicious?"

"I am not suspicious, Miss Ward; I am positive of what I assert," replied the young Neapolitan.

"Then, for pity's sake, tell us the name of this fatal being?" exclaimed Miss Ward, rather sarcastically.

But d'Altavilla was silent.

"It is always well to know whom to guard against," added the Commodore.

The young Comte reflected for a moment; then he rose, and approaching the Commodore, he bowed politely and said:

"Milord Ward, I have the honor to ask the hand of your niece."

At this unexpected request Alicia blushed to the roots of her dark hair, and from red the Commodore turned to scarlet.

The Comte d'Altavilla certainly had a right to aspire to the hand of Miss Ward; he belonged to one of the oldest and most noble families in Naples; he was handsome, young, wealthy, in favor at court, highly educated, and of irreproachable manners. He was therefore perfectly justified in making this proposal; but it was the abrupt and unexpected manner in which it was made which took the Commodore and his niece by surprise. But d'Altavilla did not appear the least discouraged or disconcerted, although he awaited the answer with a palpitating heart.

After the Commodore had partly recovered from his surprise he turned to the Comte and said:

"My dear d'Altavilla, I must confess that while I am highly honored by your proposal, it has taken me by surprise. Upon my word, I don't know what to say; I have not even consulted my niece. You were speaking of *fascinos*, *jettaturi*, horns, charms, open and closed fingers, and of a host of other things which are in no wise connected with marriage, and the next moment you take my breath away by asking for Alicia's hand! All this appears very strange, and you must pardon me if I seem a little at sea. Such a union would be very proper, I am sure, but I imagine my niece has other intentions. It is true that such an old sea-dog as I am can't read a young girl's heart, but I think I'm about right, when—"

At this moment, Alicia, seeing that her uncle was getting mixed up, came to his rescue and at the same time put an end to a scene which was becoming embarrassing.

"When an honest man asks for the hand of a young girl, Comte, she has no right to take offence, but she certainly has the right to be surprised at the strange manner in which the request is made. I requested you to disclose the name of this pretended *jettatore* whose fatal influence you claim is dangerous to me, and you suddenly change the subject by asking my uncle to honor you with the hand of his niece in marriage—I really cannot understand your motive for so doing."

"It is because a nobleman does not care to turn informer," replied Altavilla, "and because a husband alone has the right to protect his wife. But take your time to make up your mind. I can afford to wait a few days for your answer, and, until then, the horns, if properly exposed, will protect you against all fatal influences."

And with a profound bow, the Comte took his departure.

Vicè, the fawn-colored servant with the matted hair, who had come on the terrace to remove the tea-pot and the cups, had overheard the latter part of the conversation. She despised Paul d'Aspremont with all the aversion which a peasant of the Abruzzi, hardly civilized by two or three years of servitude, can have for an unbeliever suspected of *jettatura;* on the other hand, she looked upon the Comte d'Altavilla as a sort of Adonis, and she could not understand how it was that Miss Ward preferred a pale and sickly looking young man, whom she, Vicè, would not have condescended to notice even if he had not had an evil eye. Besides, she could not conceive the delicate motives which prompted the Comte to act as he had done, and in the hope of protecting her mistress, whom she dearly loved, from impending evil, Vicè leaned over towards Miss Ward as she whispered in her ear:

"I can tell you the name the Comte d'Altavilla refused to disclose."

"I forbid you to mention it, Vicè, if you care for me at all," replied Alicia. "Such superstition is positively disgraceful, and I will brave it like a Christian maiden who has nothing to fear but her God."

Chapter VII

DREAMS TORMENTING

"Jettatore! Jettatore! These words were certainly addressed to me," muttered Paul d'Aspremont to himself as he returned to the hotel. "I don't know what they mean, but they certainly mean something injurious or ridiculous What is there about me to attract attention? I believe, even if I say it myself, that I am neither handsome nor ugly, neither tall nor short, thin nor stout, and that I could pass unnoticed in a crowd. There is nothing at all eccentric in my dress; I do not wear a turban illuminated with candles like M. Jourdain in *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme;* neither do I wear a waistcoat embroidered with the rising sun; a nigger does not precede me with a pair of cymbals: my individuality, which is unknown in Naples, any way, is concealed beneath an ordinary suit, and I am not at all different in appearance from any of the swells who stroll along the Rue de Tolède, or on the largo of the palace, unless it be a little less cravat, a little less scarf-pin, a little less embroidered shirt-front, a little less waistcoat, a little less watch-chain, and considerably less curls.

"Perhaps my hair isn't properly frizzed! To-morrow I will have the barber do my hair up in crimps, as ladies do. And yet, strangers are not curiosities here, and a slight difference in dress would scarcely justify the mysterious word and the strange gesture my presence provokes. I have also noticed an expression of antipathy and fear, in the eyes of the people who recoil from me at my approach. How can I possibly have offended these persons, whom I have never met before? A passing tourist never excites any other feeling than that of indifference, unless he comes from a far-off clime or is a specimen of an unknown race; but the steamer unloads hundreds of just such tourists as I am every week, and who bothers his head about them except the fachini and the hotel-keepers? I have not killed my brother, since I never had a brother to kill, and therefore cannot bear the mark of Cain on my forehead—and yet strong men tremble and recoil at my approach. I never produced such an effect either in Paris, London, Vienna or any of the cities I have visited; sometimes I have been accused of being too proud; I have been told that I affect the English *sneer*, and that I imitate Lord Byron, but I have always received the welcome accorded a gentleman, and my advances, although a rare occurrence, were invariably appreciated. A three-days sea voyage from Marseilles to Naples certainly cannot have changed my appearance so as to render me hideous or grotesque in the eyes of the ladies, who, I flatter myself, were always favorably impressed with me—were it otherwise I never could have won the love of Alicia Ward, a charming young girl, a celestial creature—one of Tom Moore's angels!"

It was very late. With the exception of Paul, all the other guests had already retired. Gelsomina, one of the servants who took part in the discussion in the kitchen of the hotel between Scazziga and Timberio, was awaiting his arrival to lock up for the night. Nanella, the other girl, whose night on it was, begged Gelsomina to take her place, as she was afraid to meet the man suspected of being a *jettatore*. Gelsomina was well prepared for the meeting—an enormous bunch of charms was suspended around her neck, while two little coral horns dangled from her shapely ears, and the index of her right hand was pointed at the intruder in a manner which would undoubtedly have won the approbation of M. Andrea de Jorio, author of the *Mimica degli antichi investigata nel gestire napoletano*.

The courageous girl, concealing her right hand beneath a fold of her dress, presented a light to M. d'Aspremont with her left, while the piercing, almost defiant, look she directed upon him compelled the young man to lower his eyes, —a victory which appeared to greatly please Gelsomina.

After the traveller had gone up-stairs, and the noise of his footsteps was no longer heard, Gelsomina raised her head with a triumphant air, as she said to herself: "I made him lower his eyes, all the same; may Saint Januarius confound him, he is a bad man; but I am sure no harm will come to me now."

Paul slept badly; he was tormented with curious dreams relating to the strange events which had transpired during the past twenty-four hours: he imagined himself surrounded by a group of scowling, threatening faces, on which hatred, anger, and fear were plainly depicted; then the faces disappeared; long, skinny, bony fingers, with horny knuckles, were pointed at him in the darkness, threatening him with cabalistic gestures. The nails of these hands, resembling the talons of a vulture, seemed to menace the destruction of his eyesight. By a superhuman effort he succeeded in thrusting aside these hands; but they were immediately replaced by a heap of horned heads of different animals, which charged upon him and attempted to drive him into the sea, where his body was torn to shreds on a jagged coral reef; a wave carried him back to the shore, torn and disfigured and more dead than alive; and, like Byron's Don Juan, he perceived, while in a trance, the face of a young woman leaning over him—it was not Haidée, but Alicia, more beautiful even than the fair creature painted by the poet. The young girl was making desperate efforts to draw the inanimate body on the sands, and when she asked Vicè, the dark-skinned servant, to lend her a helping hand, the latter refused with a coarse laugh: finally Alicia's arms were deprived of their strength, and a retreating wave washed him out to sea.

These frightful dreams tormented the sleeper until the break of day, and Paul arose with anxiety, as if some terrible secret had been revealed to him during his sleep. He closed his eyes to shut out the truth; for the first time life seemed a burden to him. He even doubted Alicia; the Comte d'Altavilla's contented air, the attention with which the young girl listened to his song, the Commodore's approving smile,—all this recurred to him, embellished with a hundred minute details, filling his heart with sorrow and adding still more to the feeling of melancholy which had taken possession of him.

The sunlight has the power to dispel all nocturnal visions, and the demon of darkness spread out his wings and disappeared with the first rays of the rising sun. It was soon shining brightly in the clear sky, reflecting its golden rays on the blue sea, which was as clear as crystal. Paul slowly recovered his equanimity; he soon forgot the frightful dreams and the curious impression caused by his appearance the night before, or, if he thought of them at all, it was with a smile at their extravagance.

He took a stroll to Chiaja to while away the time, and amused himself by gazing at the Neapolitans as they hurried to their work; the merchants were calling out their wares for sale in the quaint dialect of the country, unintelligible to Paul, who did not speak Italian, with those excited gestures which are unknown to the children of a Northern clime; but every time he halted in front of a shop, the proprietor, instead of appearing pleased at the prospect of disposing of some of his stock, assumed a terrified air, as he murmured an invocation in a low tone, and pointed his finger at the intruder; while the gossips and old hags who infest Chiaja were even still more rude in their actions, and showered the vilest epithets upon him as they shook their fists at him.

CHAPTER VIII

ACCURSED!

ON hearing the jeers and curses of the people of Chiaja, M. d'Aspremont believed that he was the victim of the vulgar custom of ridiculing and guying well-dressed gentlemen who pass through the fish-market; but the disgust and fright they evinced was so marked that he soon realized that this was not the case; the word *jettatore,* which had already reached his ears in the theatre of San Carlino, was repeated here on every side, only this time those who pronounced it were more threatening in their manner; so he walked away slowly, carefully avoiding to fix eyes which were the cause of so much trouble, on any one. On his way, Paul passed a book-store; he halted before it, and began to fumble the leaves of the exposed volumes for want of something better to do; in this manner his back was turned upon the passing throng, and, with his eyes fixed upon the pages of the books, he avoided attracting its attention. At one moment he was tempted to charge upon the crowd and pay them for their insolence with a shower of blows with his cane, but he refrained from doing so, influenced by a vague, superstitious terror. He remembered how he once had struck an impudent coachman with his cane and had unhappily hit him on the temple, killing him instantly; this involuntary murder constantly haunted Paul and warned him against violence.

After having examined a large number of books his eyes suddenly fell upon the *"Jettatura"* of Signor Nicolo Valetta; the title of the book shone in his eyes in letters of fire, and it seemed to him as if the volume had been placed there by the hand of fate; he flung the price of the book at the shopkeeper, who was gazing at him in evident terror and toyed with a bunch of coral charms on his watch-chain. Hurrying to the hotel d'Aspremont locked himself in his room in order not to be interrupted in his perusal of the book, which, he expected, would enlighten him as to the meaning of the curious events which had transpired since his sojourn in Naples.

Signor Valetta's treatise on the evil spirit is as well known in Naples as the *"Secrets du grand Albert," "l'Etteila,"* or *"La clef des Songes"* are in Paris. Valetta defines the jettatura, explains how it can be identified by certain marks, and by what means one can protect himself against its fatal influence: he divides the jettatori into several distinct classes, arranging them in regular order in accordance with the power they possess, and discusses at great length all details connected with this curious question.

If he had picked this book up in Paris, d'Aspremont would merely have glanced over it in that careless manner with which one fumbles the leaves of an old almanac, and he would have heartily laughed at the serious manner in which the author treated this nonsense; but in his present frame of mind, agitated as he was by a number of curious incidents, he read the book over with a feeling of horror. Although he did not attempt to penetrate its meaning, the secrets of hell were plainly revealed to him; they were no longer a mystery to him, and he was now fully aware of the fatal power he possessed—he was a jettatore! He was obliged to acknowledge it, for he had every symptom and mark by which Valetta identifies them.

It sometimes happens that a man who has always thought himself blessed with an iron constitution, accidentally opens a medical work, and, in reading the pathological description of a disease therein, suddenly recognizes the symptoms in his own system; thus enlightened he feels, at the discovery of each fresh symptom, new evidence of its existence within himself, and he trembles at the seeming approach of a death he never dreamed of. Paul experienced just such an impression.

He placed himself before a mirror, and gazed at himself in awe-stricken terror: the incongruity of his appearance, composed as it was of perfect parts, which, as a rule, are not found in one person, made him look for all the world like the archangel after his expulsion from Paradise, and, as he stood there before the mirror, the fibres of his eyeballs wriggled like so many vipers; his eyebrows quivered like the bow which has just shot forth the poisoned arrow; the white furrow in his forehead resembled the white scar of a burn, while his auburn hair seemed to shed forth a reddish lustre not unlike the flames which are said to exist in hell, and the deadly pallor of his skin made every feature of his fiendish countenance stand out in bold relief.

Paul was afraid of himself. He imagined that the reflection of his eyes in the mirror was casting poisoned darts at him—picture to yourself Medusa gazing at her charming but fearful countenance on the dull surface of a brass buckler.

Paul realized that he was a fiend in human form! Although endowed with noble and affectionate instincts, he carried misfortune wherever he went; his involuntary glance, charged with venom, brought suffering and misery to those on whom it rested. He possessed the fatal power to collect, concentrate and distil the dangerous electricity and morbid miasmas and other frightful infections of the atmosphere and hurl them broadcast upon those near him. A number of curious incidents in his past which he had always credited to chance alone were now clearly explained; he distinctly remembered all sorts of strange misadventures and accidents which he never could account for.

He recalled his life, year by year; he remembered his mother, who died in giving him birth; the sad fate of his schoolmates, the dearest of whom fell from a tree and was killed while Paul encouraged him to steal some apples; an excursion in a canoe which begun most auspiciously with two of his comrades, and from which he alone returned, after the most frantic efforts to recover the bodies of the unfortunate lads who had fallen overboard; the fencing bout in which his foil broke off, transforming the foil into a sword, and in which he dangerously wounded his dearest friend—all these accidents were common enough, to be sure, and Paul had always looked upon them as such; but he knew differently since he had perused Valetta's work, and he reasoned that the fatal influence of the jettatura certainly had a hand in all these misfortunes. Such a continuous number of accidents in connection with one person was *unnatural*.

Another incident, and of more recent date, recurred to him in all its horrible reality, and in no little wise assisted in convincing him that he was undoubtedly accursed.

While in London, he frequently went to Her Majesty's Theatre, where he was greatly impressed with the grace and talent of a young English *danseuse*. Without, however, being more infatuated with her than a man of the world is with one of the graceful figures contained in a painting or an engraving, he followed her movements, as she whirled about in the mazes of the ballet or charmed the spectators in a *pas seule;* it pleased him to gaze at the sad young face, which never flushed at the applause of the audience, her beautiful blonde hair, crowned with golden stars, the chaste white shoulders, which instinctively shivered under the opera-glasses which followed her movements, the shapely limbs which were plainly visible through the thin gauze skirt and which shone beneath their silken covering like the marble of an antique statue; each time she approached the footlights, he either loudly applauded her or raised his eyeglass in order to see the better.

One night, the *danseuse*, carried away by the momentum of the dance, came too near the glittering line of gas-jets which separated the ideal from the real world. Her slender draperies, fluttering like the wings of a dove about to take its flight, suddenly came in contact with a gas-jet, and the light material was soon ablaze. In a moment the flames enveloped the young girl, who ran about for a few seconds surrounded by a mass of fire; then, turning around, she rushed madly towards the wings, where she fell down—another victim of that insatiable fiend, the fire king. Paul was deeply pained by this calamity, but he never felt any remorse, as he did not suppose he was in any way responsible for her death.

But he was now convinced that the obstinacy with which he had gazed at the *danseuse* had more or less to do with her untimely end. He looked upon himself as an assassin; he was afraid of himself, and he wished that he had never been born.

A violent reaction followed this prostration; he burst into a loud laugh and flung Valetta's book from him.

"Decidedly," he exclaimed, "I am either a madman or a fool! The hot sun of Naples has probably affected my brain. What would the members of my club say if they heard that I was actually bothering my head with the absurd question—whether I am, yes or no,—a jettatore!"

Paddy knocked discreetly at the door. Paul drew the bolt, and the valet handed him a note with Miss Ward's compliments.

M. d'Aspremont broke the seal and read as follows:

"Are you angry with me, Paul?—You did not call last evening, and your *sorbet au citron* melted in its cup while we waited for you. Until nine o'clock I listened attentively for the sound of your carriage-wheels; then I lost all hope, and I quarrelled with the Commodore. See how just women are! Undoubtedly, Pulcinella with his red nose, and Don Simon and Donna Pangrazia must be a great attraction, as my secret police have informed me that you passed last evening in the theatre at San Carlino. And you have not written a single one of those so-called *important* letters. Why not honestly confess that you are jealous of the Comte Altavilla? I thought you had more pride, and I am surprised at your modesty. You need have no fear, however. M. d'Altavilla is a great deal too handsome, and I do not fancy this Apollo with his bunch of coral charms. If I did what is considered proper I would write to say that I have not even missed you; but, since I must tell the truth, let me add that the time passed slowly without you, and that I have been extremely nervous and ill-humored; I almost boxed Vicè's ears; the girl was laughing away as if she had taken leave of her senses—but I really cannot say what has caused this unusual levity. A. W."

This humorous and sarcastic epistle brought Paul to his senses. He dressed in hot haste, ordered a carriage, and soon the doubtful Scazziga was snapping his whip as his horses galloped over the lava pavement and through the ever varying crowd on the quai of Santa-Lucia.

"I say, Scazziga, why all this hurry? You will surely upset us!" called out M. d'Aspremont. The coachman turned around to reply, and met Paul's furious glance. A stone he had not seen struck one of the wheels, knocking him clean off the box. Active as a monkey, he sprang back in his seat, but there was a big lump, as large as a hen's egg, in the middle of his forehead.

"I'll be hanged if I turn around the next time you have anything to say!" he grumbled: "Timberio and Falsacappa were right—he is a jettatore! I will buy myself a pair of horns to-morrow—they can't do any harm even if they don't do any good."

This little incident annoyed Paul; he added this last accident to the series of misfortunes with which he had been identified; it is no unusual occurrence for a carriage to run against a stone, and a clumsy coachman frequently loses his seat. There was therefore nothing so very wonderful in this, after all. And yet, the *effect* had followed the *cause* so promptly, Scazziga's fall coincided so exactly with the *glance* he had given him, that all his doubts returned.

"I have half a mind to get out of this wonderful country," he said to himself. "I can feel my brain rattling in my head like a dried nut in its shell. But if I confided my fears to Alicia she would simply laugh at me, and the climate is favorable to her health. Her health! why, she was strong and healthy when I first met her. And yet, before my very eyes, I have seen her growing thinner and thinner every day! How her bright eyes become dimmed in my presence, and her shapely hand has fallen away at my touch! One would suppose that consumption had already claimed her as its own. In my absence, she has regained her strength, the bloom has returned to her cheek, and her chest, which caused her physician no end of anxiety, has ceased to trouble her; delivered of my fatal presence, she would live for years. Am I not killing her? Have I not involuntarily cast the fascino's spell about her? But, after all, I can see no occasion for worriment, although she did have a bad spell the other evening; most English girls are subject to lung troubles."

These thoughts filled Paul's mind until the end of the journey. When he presented himself upon the terrace, the immense pair of Sicilian bull's horns presented by the Comte Altavilla was the first object to meet his view. Noticing that Paul had remarked them, the Commodore turned blue: that was his style of blushing, for, not so discreet as his niece, he had lent a friendly ear to Vicè.

Alicia, with an imperative gesture, motioned to the domestic to remove the horns, and fixing her lovely eyes, filled with love and confidence, on Paul, gave him a kindly welcome.

"Let them remain where they are," said Paul to Vicè; "they are very beautiful."

Chapter IX

A BROKEN FIBRE

The fact that Paul had condescended to notice the horns presented by the Comte Altavilla appeared to please the Commodore; while Vicè smiled, showing her white fangs, and Alicia, with a rapid glance, seemed to question Paul without eliciting a reply in return.

A painful silence followed.

The first minutes of a visit, no matter how frequent the visitor may call or how intimate he may be, are always embarrassing. The Commodore was playing with his thumbs; d'Aspremont gazed fixedly at the horns which he had forbidden Vicè to remove, and Alicia pretended to tie the red bow of her white muslin wrapper.

It was Miss Ward who first broke the ice, with that freedom enjoyed by young English girls, so reserved and modest after marriage.

"Really, Paul, you have been anything but agreeable during the past few days. Is your gallantry a rare hothouse flower which blooms only on English soil, or does the hot sun of Naples retard its development? How devoted, how attentive you were in our little home in Lincolnshire! You approached me with your hand on your heart, and with words of love on your lips, always prepared to fall on your knees before the idol of your dreams—in fact you were just such a model lover as one reads about in novels."

"I love you more than ever, Alicia," replied d'Aspremont in a voice full of emotion, although he did not remove his eyes from the horns which hung on one of the pillars of the terrace.

"You say it so mournfully that one must indeed be confident to believe it," continued Miss Ward; "I rather imagine that what pleased you most was my diaphanous complexion, my sylph-like form and ethereal appearance; my suffering gave me a certain romantic charm which I no longer possess."

"Alicia! You are lovelier now than ever before!"

"Words, words, idle words, as Shakespeare says. I am so beautiful, in fact, that you do not condescend to notice me."

And she spoke the truth; Paul had not fixed his eyes upon her during the entire conversation.

"Well," she said with a deep sigh, "I see that I have become a stout and awkward peasant, with a red, freckled face, without the slightest distinction, and totally unfit to figure at the county ball or in an album of celebrated beauties."

"Evidently, you delight in caluminating yourself, Miss Ward," remarked Paul, with his eyes still lowered upon the ground.

"You had much rather confess that I am horrible. And it is your fault, too, Commodore; with your chicken-wings, your cutlets, your *filets de bœuf,* your little glass of Madeira, your excursions on horseback, your salt water baths, and gymnastic exercises—you have succeeded in dispelling M. d'Aspremont's poetical illusions by transforming me into a strong, healthy girl."

"You are tantalizing M. d'Aspremont and you are guying me," replied the Commodore; "but, at all events, my *filets de bœuf* are strengthening, and a good glass of Madeira has never harmed any one."

"How disappointed you must be, my dear fellow! you leave a skeleton behind you, and you are confronted a few months later with what the physicians term a strong, well-constituted woman! Now, listen to me, since you haven't the courage to look for yourself, and hold up your hands in terror—I have gained seven pounds since I left England!"

"Eight pounds!" proudly interrupted the Commodore, who cared for Alicia with the tenderness of a mother.

"Are you quite sure that I have really gained as much as all that? I am sure you wish to disenchant M. d'Aspremont forever," remarked Alicia laughingly.

While the young girl was tantalizing him in this manner, Paul, who was now a firm believer in his fatal power, never permitted his eyes to rest upon her, and he either fixed them upon the talismanic horns or turned them upon the broad expanse of water which could plainly be seen from the terrace.

He asked himself whether it was not his duty to desert Alicia, even though he passed for a man devoid of honor and faith, to go and end his days on some desert island where, at least, his fatal power would not strike down those with whom he came in contact.

"I know why you are so serious," continued Alicia in the same jesting manner, "the date of our marriage has been arranged for next month; and you shudder at the thought of becoming the husband of a poor country girl, devoid of style or figure. Very well, then, I give you back your freedom—you are now at liberty to wed my friend Sarah Templeton, who eats pickles and drinks vinegar all day long in order to get thin!"

Then she burst into a hearty laugh, while the Commodore and Paul joined her.

When she finally realized that her sarcasm had no effect on d'Aspremont, she took him by the hand, and leading him to the piano, which was situated in a little arbor on the terrace, she remarked while she opened her music:

"I see, my dear, that you are in no humor to talk to-day, so you will have to sing that which you cannot say. You will therefore accompany me in this duettino, the music of which is very easy."

Paul seated himself on the stool, while Miss Ward stood up beside him in order to follow the notes of the song. The Commodore threw back his head, stretched out his legs, and assumed the attitude of an attentive listener, as was his wont on the pretence that he was an ardent admirer of Beethoven and

Chopin, but he invariably fell fast asleep before the last note on the first sheet was reached, accompanying the singer with a series of loud snorts and snores.

The duettino was a bright and pleasing melody composed by Cimarosa, with words by Métastase, and, as it is said that music has the power to soothe the savage beast, it no doubt dispels evil spirits as well. In a few moments, Paul no longer thought of magic horns, conjurer's fingers, or coral charms; he had completely forgotten Signor Valetta's book and all the superstitions of the jettatura. His mind was free from all such thoughts and his soul ascended lightly, together with Alicia's sweet voice, towards the bright sun.

The grasshoppers ceased their chirping in order to listen, while the brisk sea breeze carried away the notes together with the leaves of the flowers which had fallen from the vases on the terrace.

"My uncle sleeps as soundly as did the seven giants in the cave. If it was not an old habit, our pride as virtuosos might possibly be ruffled," remarked Alicia as she closed the piano. "While he is taking his *siesta,* will you take a stroll in the garden with me, Paul? I have not yet pointed out the charms of my Paradise to you."

And she took down a large straw hat from the nail on which it was hanging.

Alicia professed to be decidedly original in horticulture; she did not permit any one to pluck the flowers or trim the branches of the bushes; and that which charmed her most when she first inspected the villa was the natural and wild state of the vegetation.

The young people forced their way through the dense underbrush. Alicia walked ahead, and she laughed merrily whenever the branches of a laurel-rose bush, displaced by her, would fly back and swish Paul across the face.

"Here is my favorite retreat, Paul," said Alicia, pointing to a clump of picturesque rocks, protected by an overhanging mass of orange and myrtle leaves.

She seated herself on one of the rocks, and pointing to the moss-covered earth, she requested Paul to kneel there at her feet.

"Now place your two hands in mine and look me straight in the face. In a month's time I will be your wife. Why do your eyes avoid mine?"

At this moment, Paul, whose mind was again filled with thoughts of the jettatura, turned his head aside.

"Are you afraid to read a guilty thought in my eyes? You know my heart has been yours since the first day you presented yourself with that letter of introduction in our parlor in Richmond. I belong to that proud, romantic and loving English race which, in a moment, conceives the love of a lifetime, and those who love thus are never afraid to die. Gaze into my eyes, Paul, I command you; do not turn aside your glance, or I shall begin to believe that a gentleman who should fear no one but his God is afraid of a vile superstition. Now turn your eyes upon me and judge for yourself whether I am pretty enough to take for a drive, in an open carriage in Hyde Park, after we are married."

Paul, carried away by her enthusiasm, fixed his eyes upon Alicia in a glance full of passionate love. Suddenly the young girl's face assumed a deathly pallor; a sharp pain pierced her heart like an arrow; it seemed as if some fibre had parted in her bosom, and she raised her handkerchief to her lips. A drop of crimson blood stained the fine linen, but Alicia hastily folded the handkerchief as she murmured:

"Oh, thanks, Paul! You have made me so happy! I thought you no longer loved me!"

CHAPTER X

HER DUTY

THE movement made by Alicia to conceal her handkerchief was not prompt enough, however, to escape M. d'Aspremont's notice; a frightful pallor spread o'er Paul's features, for in this he perceived an irrefutable proof of his fatal power, and all sorts of strange thoughts flitted through his mind. Was it not his duty to put an end to himself as a public malefactor, the unconscious perpetrator of so much misery? He would have willingly bent his form under the severest punishment and borne it without flinching, but the thought of depriving the one he loved above all else on earth of life, nearly made him frantic.

The brave girl had not given way to the painful sensation she experienced as Paul directed his eyes upon her—although it coincided precisely with the Comte d'Altavilla's description. But, as we have said before, Alicia was not superstitious. Besides, were she convinced beyond all doubt of the existence of the *fascino* in Paul she would not have recoiled, and Miss Ward would have preferred to be stricken dead by a glance from the man she loved, rather than break her vow. Alicia resembled, in more ways than one, Shakespeare's determined heroines, whose love is pure and constant, and, when once pledged, is retained forever. She had pressed Paul's hand, and no other living man would ever hold her shapely hand in his. She considered herself pledged beyond recall, and would have shrunk from the idea of any other union.

Her gayety was, therefore, so natural or so well assumed, that she would have deceived the most attentive observer, and, bidding Paul who was still kneeling at her feet, to rise, she took his arm and led him through the wild and dense shrubbery of the garden until they reached a clearing through which they perceived the blue sea stretching out before them its calm, endless expanse. This beautiful vision dispersed all of Paul's sombre thoughts; Alicia confidingly leaned upon his arm, as if she already considered herself his wife. The two lovers finally regained the terrace, where the Commodore, still under the spell cast upon him by the music, was fast asleep in his bamboo chair. Paul took his departure, and Alicia, imitating the gestures of the Neapolitans, sent him a kiss on the tips of her fingers as she remarked: "Until tomorrow, dear Paul," in a voice full of tenderness and love.

"How beautiful you are today, Alicia!" suddenly remarked the Commodore, awakened from his nap, as he noticed the glowing color on his niece's cheek.

"You spoil me, uncle; and if I am not the vainest girl in the three kingdoms it is certainly no fault of yours. Fortunately I do not believe in flattery, even if it is disinterested."

"You are beautiful, dangerously beautiful," continued the Commodore, speaking to himself. "She reminds me of her mother, poor Nancy, who died on her nineteenth birthday. Such angels are not destined for this earth; at any moment wings are likely to make their appearance on their shoulders; they are too white, too pure, too perfect, the red blood of life is missing in these ethereal beings. The Almighty, who blesses the earth with their presence for a few years, seems impatient to regain possession of them. This dazzling beauty saddens my heart; it seems almost like the final parting."

"Well then, uncle, since I am so pretty it is high time for me to marry," continued Miss Ward, who noticed the frown gathering on the Commodore's brow; "the veil and the orange-blossoms would become me well, I fancy."

"You wish to marry! Are you then so anxious to leave your old weather-beaten uncle, Alicia?"

"I will never leave you, since M. d'Aspremont agreed that we should all live together. You know perfectly well I could never bear to part from you."

"M. d'Aspremont! M. d'Aspremont!—The wedding has not taken place, however—"

"Has he not your word—and mine? Sir Joshua Ward has never broken faith."

"I admit that he has my word; there is no use denying that," replied the Commodore, evidently embarrassed.

"And the six months' limit you stipulated has expired—since a few days," continued Alicia, with increasing color.

"Ah! so you have counted the months, my girl; you had better not place too much confidence in his discreet manner."

"I love M. d'Aspremont," replied the girl simply.

"This is the climax!" exclaimed Sir Joshua Ward, who imbued with Vicè's and d'Altavilla's quaint notions, did not in the least like the idea of having a jettatore for a son-in-law. "Why can't you have somebody else!"

"I have not two hearts," answered Alicia, "and I can have but one love, even though I were to die, like my mother, at nineteen."

"Don't talk such nonsense! the idea of mentioning death. I beg you to change the subject," implored the Commodore.

"Have you anything with which to reproach M. d'Aspremont?"

"Nothing—decidedly nothing."

"Has he forfeited his honor in any possible way? Has he ever shown himself to be a coward or a liar? Has he ever insulted a woman or recoiled before a man? Is his coat-of-arms tarnished by any secret taint? Can not a young girl take his arm in public without having to blush or lower her eyes?"

"M. Paul d'Aspremont is a perfect gentleman; no one can reproach him on that score."

"Believe me, uncle, when I assure you that if any such reason existed I would renounce him without the slightest hesitation, and would bury myself in some inaccessible retreat; but for no other reason, do you hear, will I break my word," added Miss Ward, in a gentle though determined tone.

The Commodore toyed with his thumbs, an invariable habit of his when he was at a loss what to say.

"Why are you so cold to Paul?" continued Miss Ward; "formerly, you were so fond of him; why, you couldn't get along without him in your house at Lincolnshire, and you used to tell him, while you nearly squeezed his fingers into a jelly, that he was a worthy lad and that you would willingly confide the happiness of a young girl to his keeping."

"Why, of course, I loved Paul," said the Commodore, evidently moved by these recollections; "but that which is obscure in the English fog becomes as clear as daylight in the sun of Naples—"

"What do you mean?" asked Alicia, trembling in spite of herself, while the color fled from her cheeks, leaving her white as marble.

"I mean that your Paul is possessed—he is a jettatore."

"What! you! my uncle; you, Sir Joshua Ward, a nobleman, a Christian, a subject of Her British Majesty, a former officer in the English navy, an enlightened and civilized being, whom one would not hesitate to question on any subject—you who are wise and highly educated, you who read the Bible and the Gospel every night—you do not hesitate to accuse Paul of being a jettatore! Oh! I never expected this from *you!*"

"My dear Alicia," replied the Commodore, "as long as you are not concerned, I may be all you claim, but when a danger—even an imaginary danger, do you understand—threatens you, I become more superstitious than a peasant of the Abruzzes, a lazzarone of Chiaja, or even a Neapolitan comte. Paul can look at me as long as he has a mind to with his fatal eyes, I will remain as calm as if facing the point of a sword or the barrel of a pistol. The fascino won't take on my tough hide, tanned by all the suns of the universe. I am only credulous on your account, dear Alicia, and I confess that I feel a cold perspiration dampening my forehead everytime the unfortunate lad turns his eyes upon you. He has no evil intentions, I know, and he loves you dearer than life itself, but it seems to me that, under his influence, your features change, your color disappears, and that you attempt to conceal a terrible pain; and then I am seized with a furious desire to dig out the eyes of your Paul d'Aspremont with the point of the horns presented by d'Altavilla."

"My poor, dear uncle," said Alicia, deeply moved by this sudden outburst on the part of the old Commodore; "our lives are in the hands of God; not a prince expires on his royal couch, not a beggar dies on his humble cot, but his time has been marked in heaven; the fascino is powerless to do bodily injury, and it is a crime for us to believe that a peculiar look can exert evil influence upon us. Now you know perfectly well, uncle, you were not speaking seriously a moment ago; your love for me, no doubt, affected your judgment. Am I not right? Now, you would not dare tell M. d'Aspremont that you would withdraw the hand of your niece after you had placed it within his, and that you no longer desired him as a son-in-law, on the absurd plea that he was—a jettatore!"

"By Joshua, my patron saint, who stopped the sun in its course!" exclaimed the Commodore; "I would not hurt the feelings of your pretty M.

Paul for anything. But what matters it to me whether I appear ridiculous, absurd, or unloyal, when your health, your life perhaps, is at stake! I gave your hand in wedlock to a man, not to a charmer. I pledged my word; well, then, I will retract my promise—that's all! and if he isn't satisfied, I will give him all the satisfaction he desires!"

And the Commodore, exasperated beyond measure, made an imaginary thrust, as if he was attacking an adversary, heedless of the fact that he was suffering from a severe attack of gout.

"Pardon me, Sir Joshua Ward, but you would never do that," calmly remarked Alicia.

The Commodore seated himself in his bamboo chair, all out of breath, and remained silent.

"Well then, uncle, even though this frightful accusation were true, would it be honorable to abandon M. d'Aspremont when he is guilty of a misfortune and not of a crime? Are you not aware that the harm he might cause would not be occasioned by his will, and that you have never seen a more noble, generous, or loving disposition in man before?"

"One does not marry a vampire—no matter how good the brute's intentions may be," grumbled the Commodore.

"But all this is chimerical, absurd, and superstitious; what is worse, however, is that Paul has become alarmed at this superstition, and he is afraid of himself; he believes in his fatal power, and every little accident convinces him that he is correct in this supposition. Is it not my duty, I who am his wife in the eyes of Heaven and who will soon be his in the eyes of the world—blessed by you, dear uncle—to calm this excited imagination, to chase away these phantoms, to allay by kind words this wild anxiety, and thus save from destruction this noble soul?"

"You are always right, Alicia," replied the Commodore, "and I, whom you have just called wise, am only an old madman. I believe that this Vicè is a witch, and that she has turned my head with all her nonsense. As to the Comte d'Altavilla, with his horns and his collection of coral charms, he strikes me as being a fool. No doubt, it was a stratagem on his part to get Paul out of the way in order to win you himself."

"It may be that the Comte d'Altavilla acted as he did in perfect good faith," remarked Alicia with a smile; "only a short time ago, you shared his opinions on the jettatura."

"Do not abuse your advantage, Miss Alicia; besides, I have not so fully recovered from my mistake that I may not err again. The wisest thing, in my estimation, would be to leave Naples by the first steamer and return quietly to England. When Paul will not have bull's horns, deer antlers, coral charms, extended fingers, and all those devilish arrangements constantly before him, he will recover his former peace of mind, while I will forget this unearthly business, which almost made me break my word and commit an action unworthy of a gentleman. Since it has been so arranged, you will marry Paul. You will reserve the parlor and the ground floor of the house in Richmond for me, and the left wing in the castle in Lincolnshire, and we will all live happily together in England. If your health requires a warmer climate, we will rent a country seat at Cannes, where Lord Brougham's beautiful place is situated, and where, thank Heaven! this superstition relating to the jettatura is unknown. What do you think of my plan, Alicia?"

"It does not require my approval; am I not the most obedient of nieces?"

"Yes—when I do what you want me to do, you little minx," laughingly remarked the Commodore as he entered the villa.

Alicia remained on the terrace a few minutes longer; but whether this scene had affected her to such a degree, or whether Paul had really exercised his fearful power on the young girl, the warm breeze chilled her through and through, and at night, as she was feeling uncomfortable, she requested Vicè to wrap up her feet, which were as white and cold as marble, in one of those pretty knitted robes they make in Venice.

However, the glow-worms glittered among the shrubbery and the crickets chirped, while the yellow moon ascended the sky in a haze of light and heat.

CHAPTER XI

THE RED AUREOLE

THE day following that on which the scene recorded above took place, Alicia, who had passed a miserable night, scarcely touched the potion Vicè gave her every morning, and placed it carelessly on the stand by the side of the bed. While she did not feel any pain in particular, she was completely worn out. She requested Vicè to give her a hand-glass, for a young girl worries more about the alteration of her features caused by illness than about the malady itself. She was deathly pale, with the exception of two little red spots, however, looking for all the world like a couple of red rose-leaves in a bowl of milk. Her eyes shone with unwonted brilliancy, lighted by the remaining sparks of a burning fever; but the bright red of her lips was not as pronounced as usual, and, in order to restore their accustomed color, she bit them with her white teeth.

She arose from her couch, and enveloped herself in a dressing-gown of white cashmere, winding the gauze scarf around her neck, for although the crickets chirped in the warmth outside, she felt chilly, and she made her appearance on the terrace at the accustomed hour in order not to arouse her uncle's suspicions. She partook of a slight repast, although she was not hungry at all, for the faintest indication of an indisposition would have been accredited to Paul's evil influence, and this was precisely what Alicia wished to avoid.

Then, excusing herself on the plea that the bright sun was too strong for her, she retired to her room, not, however, before assuring her uncle that she had never felt better in all her life.

"I hardly believe that," the Commodore muttered to himself after she had retired; "she has a couple of bright spots near the eyes, just like her mother, who always pretended to have never felt better in all her life. What's to be done? To get Paul out of the way would only hasten her death; I must let Nature have its way. Alicia is so young! But it is just such young people that grim Death craves for; he is as jealous as a woman. Possibly I had better send for a physician,—although of what use is medicine to an angel? And yet, all the symptoms had disappeared. Ah! if it should be you, accursed Paul, whose breath thus destroys this divine flower, I would strangle you with my own hands. Nancy was not under the influence of the jettatore, and yet she died.—What if Alicia should die! No, it is not possible. I have not offended the Almighty in any possible way that He should reserve such a terrible punishment for me. When that comes to pass, I shall have already been sleeping for many years in my native village under a stone inscribed, *Sacred to the memory of Sir Joshua Ward*. It is she who will go and pray on the moss-covered grave of the old Commodore. I don't know what's the matter with me, but I am as blue and melancholy as old Harry himself this morning!"

In order to dispel these unpleasant thoughts, the commodore added a little more Jamaica rum to his cold tea, and sent for his houka, an innocent recreation which he only permitted himself in the absence of Alicia, whose delicate constitution would not have supported even this light smoke mingled with perfumes.

He had already boiled the aromatic water, and had blown three or four bluish clouds towards the sky, when Vicè announced the Comte d'Altavilla.

"Sir Joshua," said the Comte after the usual formalities, "have you thought over my request of the other day?"

"I have thought it over, Comte," replied the Commodore; "but you know my word is pledged to M. Paul d'Aspremont."

"That may be, and yet there are cases where promises have been retracted; for instance, when it is pledged to a man who subsequently turns out to be an altogether different personage from what he seemed to be at first."

"I beg of you, Comte, to speak plainer; I do not understand you."

"I dislike the idea of accusing a rival, but you must certainly understand what I have reference to from the hints I let fall at our last meeting. If you had M. Paul d'Aspremont out of the way, would you accept me for a son-in-law?"

"As far as I am concerned I would be delighted; but it is not at all likely that Miss Ward would like any such substitution. She is head over ears in love with this Paul; it is partly my fault, as I encouraged the lad before I got wind of these stories—I beg your pardon, Comte, but I am hardly accountable for my words this morning."

"Then you really wish your niece to die?" demanded d'Altavilla, seriously.

"Thunder and lightning! my niece die!" exclaimed the Commodore, springing from his chair and hurling aside the morocco-covered tube of the houka. "Is she then dangerously ill?"

"Don't alarm yourself, milord; Miss Alicia may live, and live very long at that."

"Bravo! that's the way I like to hear you talk; you almost took my breath away—you fairly struck me amidships."

"But on one condition," added the Comte d'Altavilla; "and that is, that she never again lays eyes on M. Paul d'Aspremont."

"Ah! the subject of the fascino is again cropping out! Unfortunately, Miss Ward does not believe in it."

"Listen to me," continued the Comte, not at all dismayed by the old Commodore's want of sympathy. "When I first met Miss Alicia at the ball given by the Prince of Syracuse, and I conceived this ardent passion for her, I was smitten by the healthy, robust appearance of your niece. Her beauty was fairly dazzling, and it eclipsed that of other English, Russian, and Italian belles. To the British air of distinction was added the noble grace of the ancient goddesses; pardon this mythology on the part of a descendant of a Greek colony."

"She was indeed superb! Miss Edwina O'Herty, Lady Eleanor Lilly, Miss Jane Strangford, and the Princess Véra Fédorowna Bariatinski were so envious that they almost had an attack of jaundice," the Commodore approvingly remarked.

"And have you not noticed that her former beauty has been replaced by a jaded, worn-out appearance, that her features have lost some of their remarkable symmetry, and that the veins of her hand are plainly visible through her clear white skin, while her voice has a strange though, melodious vibration? The terrestrial appearance has been replaced by an angelic being. Miss Alicia is rapidly assuming that beautiful, though ethereal appearance I do not fancy in worldly beings."

What the Comte said agreed exactly with the Commodore's secret impressions, and he remained as if in a dream for some little time.

"All this is quite true; and although I frequently try to pretend that it is a mere freak of my imagination, I cannot dispute the truth of your assertion."

"Pardon me," interrupted the Comte, "but did you remark any of these symptoms previous to M. d'Aspremont's arrival in England?"

"Never! she was the heartiest and gayest lass in the three kingdoms."

"M. d'Aspremont's presence therefore tallies with the periodical attacks which have so affected Miss Ward's health. I do not ask you to place faith in the quaint superstition of our country, but you will certainly agree that these strange facts are deserving of your attention—"

"But Alicia—her illness may result from natural causes after all," said the Commodore, partly convinced by d'Altavilla's reasoning, although his English pride struggled against the popular Neapolitan belief.

"Miss Ward is not ill; she is being poisoned by M. d'Aspremont's glance, which, if it does not possess the fascino of the jettatore, is at all events fatal."

"What can I do? She loves Paul; she laughs at the superstition of the fascino, and claims that one cannot give such an excuse to a man of honor for refusal."

"I have no right to occupy myself with your niece's affairs; I am neither her brother, her cousin, nor her affianced husband; but, if I obtain your permission, I will make a desperate effort to save her from this fatal influence. Oh! do not be alarmed; I will do nothing rash; although I am quite young, I am old enough to realize the injustice of causing a scandal where a young lady is concerned; but, I beg of you, don't question me as to the plan I propose to pursue—that is my secret. I trust, however, you have sufficient confidence in my honor to believe that I will act as discreetly and honorably as possible."

"Then you love my niece very much?" asked Sir Joshua.

"Yes, then, I love her, though I have no hope; but kindly grant me the right to act as I see fit in this affair."

"You are a terrible man, Comte. Very well! you have my permission to do as you see fit. Try to save Alicia—that is all I ask you."

The Comte bowed politely, and, entering his carriage, he directed the coachman to drive to the Hotel de Rome.

Paul, with his elbows on the table, was plunged in deep thought; he had seen the drop of blood discolor Alicia's handkerchief, and was convinced that he alone was to blame. He reproached himself with his murderous love; he blamed himself for accepting the devotion of this beautiful young girl who was determined to die for him, and he asked himself by what superhuman sacrifice he could repay this sublime abnegation.

Paddy interrupted him in his revery by presenting the Comte d'Altavilla's card.

"The Comte d'Altavilla! what brings him here?" questioned Paul, taken completely by surprise at this unexpected visit. "Show him in."

When the Neapolitan appeared on the threshold of the door, M. d'Aspremont had already assumed the mask of indifference under which men of the world conceal their impressions.

With marked politeness, he pointed to an arm-chair, while he seated himself on a lounge and waited patiently, with his eyes fixed on the visitor, for the latter to begin.

"Monsieur," began the Comte as he played with the charms on his watch-chain, "what I have to say is so strange, so out of place, and so unbecoming that you have the right to throw me out of the window. I trust, however, you will spare me this brutal treatment, as I am prepared to render you reparation when and where you please."

"I am listening, monsieur, and accept the offer you make me in case your conversation displeases me," replied Paul, without moving a muscle of his face.

"You are a jettatore!"

At these words, a greenish tinge spread o'er Paul's countenance, a red aureole encircled his eyes; his eyebrows drew closer together, the furrow in his forehead grew larger, while his eyes darted forth flashes of lightning; he raised himself partly in his chair, tearing the lining away in his nervous grasp. The spectacle was so terrible that d'Altavilla, brave man though he was, seized one of the little coral branches on his chain and instinctively brought the sharp point to bear upon his *vis-à-vis*.

By a superhuman effort, M. d'Aspremont regained his self-possession and remarked:

"You were right, monsieur; you are entitled to the reward you spoke of for such an insult; but I will bide my time to obtain a more suitable reparation."

"Believe me," responded the Comte, "I would not have permitted myself to offer to a gentleman such an insult, which can only be wiped out in blood, unless I had a serious reason for so doing. I love Miss Alicia Ward."

"What matters this to me?"

"As you say, it matters very little to you, for she loves you; but I, Don Felipe d'Altavilla, forbid you to call upon Miss Ward again."

"I have no orders to receive from you."

"I know it," replied the Neapolitan; "And I certainly do not expect that you will obey me."

"Then what other motive has prompted you to speak thus?" asked Paul.

"I am convinced that the fascino by which you have involuntarily charmed Miss Ward has resulted most unfortunately for her. It is an absurd idea, a prejudice worthy of the dark ages—I will not discuss this with you. In spite of yourself your eyes have directed themselves upon Miss Ward, and you are killing her with your fatal glance. There is no other way to avoid this sad catastrophe than by seeking a quarrel. If we had lived in the sixteenth century I would have ordered my tenants to strangle you in the maintains, but these customs are now out of date. At first I thought seriously of requesting you to return to France; but that was too simple; you would have laughed at a rival who would have thus coolly asked you to go away, leaving him alone with your fiancée, on the ground that you were a jettatore."

While the Comte d'Altavilla was speaking, Paul d'Aspremont was a victim of the most violent emotions. Was it really possible that he, a Christian, was in the devil's clutches, and that the light of Hell shone from his eyes? That he planted the seeds of destruction along his path, and that his love for the dearest and purest woman on earth would eventually cause her death! For a moment his reason tottered, and his brain throbbed as if it would burst his cranium.

"Upon your honor, Comte, do you believe what you say to be true?" exclaimed d'Aspremont, after a short silence which the Neapolitan respected.

"Upon my honor, such is my belief."

"Oh, then it is true!" muttered Paul to himself. "I am therefore an assassin, a demon, a vampire! I am killing this sweet creature, breaking the old Commodore's heart!" and he was on the point of promising the Comte that he would not attempt to see Alicia again; but pride and jealousy asserted themselves and froze the words on his lips.

"Comte, I hereby warn you that I will call on Miss Ward the moment you have taken your departure."

"I will not seize you by the collar to prevent your going; however, I will be delighted to meet you tomorrow morning, at six o'clock, in the ruins of Pompeii, near the thermæ, if you have no objection. What weapon do you prefer?—you are the offended party—the sword, sabre, or pistol?"

"We will fight with knives and blindfolded, separated by a handkerchief the ends of which we will hold in our left hands. We must equalize the chances—I am a jettatore; I could kill you with a glance, monsieur le Comte!"

And Paul d'Aspremont, bursting into a harsh laugh, opened the door and disappeared.

CHAPTER XII

TWO STILETTOS

ALICIA had taken up her quarters in one of the rooms on the ground floor of the villa, the walls of which were frescoed according to the style prevalent in Italy, where very little wall-paper is used. Manilla mats covered the floor; on a table, over which a piece of Turkish carpet was thrown, lay the poetical works of Coleridge, Shelley, Tennyson, and Longfellow; a mirror, set in an antique frame, and a few cane-bottomed chairs completed the furniture of the room. Window-shades of Chinese bamboo, on which were designed dragons, snakes, and all kinds of quaint birds, gave a soft light to the apartment.

The young girl, who was far from well, was reclining on a narrow lounge near the window; two or three Morocco cushions supported her; a Venetian cover was thrown over her feet, and thus prepared, she could receive Paul without in the least offending the rules of English etiquette.

The book she had been reading had slipped from her hand; her eyes wandered aimlessly beneath her long, silken lashes and seemed to be gazing into another world; she experienced that lassitude which always follows the fever, and was engaged in chewing the leaves of an orange-tree which stretched its fragrant branches, covered with blossoms, through the open window. Is there not a painting of Venus chewing rose-leaves? What a charming companion a modern artist could have painted to this old Venetian picture, representing Alicia munching the orange-blossoms!

She was thinking of M. d'Aspremont, and she wondered whether she would live to see the day when she would be his wife; not that she dreaded the fatal influence of the fascino, but she felt herself giving way to strange presentiments: that very night she had a dream, and she had not yet recovered from its effects.

In her dream, she fancied herself lying in bed awake, her eyes riveted on the open door of her room, where she momentarily expected *some one* to appear. After two or three minutes of anxious expectation a white and sylph-like form made its appearance, enveloped in a white cloud, gradually becoming more distinct as it approached the bed.

The apparition was clothed in a dress of white muslin, the folds of which trailed on the ground; long tresses of black hair fell about the pale, white face, while two little red spots were plainly visible on her cheeks. In her hand the apparition held a flower, a tea-rose, the petals of which, as they fell on the floor, resembled so many tears.

Alicia did not know her mother, who had died a year after her birth; but she had frequently stood in silent contemplation before a faded miniature of Nancy Ward, and from the resemblance she realized that it was her mother who stood before her now: the white dress, the black hair, the white cheeks tinted with pink, even the tea-rose were reproduced as she had seen them in the portrait—only it was the miniature enlarged and developed to life-size, an animated, moving picture as one usually beholds in a dream.

A feeling of tenderness mingled with fear seized Alicia. She wanted to stretch her arms out to the phantom, but she was unable to move them, heavy as marble, from the pillow on which they were resting. She attempted to speak, but her tongue refused to articulate.

Nancy, after having placed the tea-rose on the table, kneeled beside the bed and laid her head on Alicia's breast, listening to the respiration of the lungs and counting the heartbeats. The cold touch of the apparition gave the young girl, alarmed by this silent auscultation, the sensation of a piece of ice.

The apparition rose, and casting a loving passionate glance at the young girl, began to count the leaves of the rose, most of which had fallen out,—then whispered: "There is only one more—one more."

A heavy pall arose between the sleeper and the vision, and it disappeared in the darkness as Alicia dropped off to sleep.

Had her mother's spirit come to warn her? What significance was attached to the mysterious words, "There is only one more—one more," as whispered by the apparition? Was this pale, drooping rose the symbol of her life? This strange dream, with its horrible yet charming details, this beautiful spectre draped in muslin which counted the petals of the faded flower, filled the young girl's breast with fear, a cloud of sadness gathered about her lovely forehead, and strange thoughts occupied her mind.

This orange-branch which shook out its blossoms in profusion about her had something mournful about it as well. Were the little white stars therefore not destined to glisten on her bridal veil? With a movement of horror, Alicia withdrew the flower she was biting from her lips—the blossom was already discolored and faded. . . .

The time for M. d'Aspremont's expected visit drew near. Miss Ward struggled bravely against the feeling that oppressed her; she passed her hand through her hair and readjusted the folds of her scarf, while she picked up the fallen book in order to appear engaged when the visitor should make his appearance.

Paul arrived at last, and Miss Ward welcomed him with a forced laugh, as she did not wish to alarm him for fear he would accuse himself as being the cause of her illness. The scene he had just had with the Comte d'Altavilla gave Paul a savage and irritated appearance, which caused Vicè to make the cabalistic sign, but Alicia's loving smile soon dispelled the clouds which had gathered about his brow.

"I hope you are not seriously ill, Alicia," he said as he seated himself beside her.

"Oh, it is nothing, I assure you; I am a little tired, that is all: the sirocco paid us a visit yesterday, and that African wind is always too much for me. Just you wait until we get back to Lincolnshire and you shall see how well I am! Now that I have recovered my strength, I will take my turn at the oars as we take our daily row on the lake!"

As she said this she could not restrain a convulsive cough.

M. d'Aspremont turned pale and lowered his eyes.

A long silence ensued. Alicia was the first to speak.

"I have never given you anything, Paul," she said as she removed a plain gold band from her wasted finger; "take this ring and wear it in memory of me; it will fit you, as your hand is no larger than a woman's. Good-bye! I don't feel well and I would like to sleep a little. Come and see me to-morrow."

Paul withdrew with a heavy heart; the efforts made by Alicia to conceal her suffering were useless; he loved Miss Ward to distraction, and yet he was killing her. Was not this ring she had just given him, a pledge that they would meet in the next world?

He walked up and down the beach like a madman, dreaming of flight. He contemplated entering a Trappist convent, there to await his death seated on his coffin, without ever raising the cowl of his frock. It seemed as if he was cowardly and ungrateful, not to sacrifice his love, and to cease this abuse of Alicia's heroism: for she knew everything, she was aware that he was a jettatore, as the Comte d'Altavilla had already proclaimed him to be, and, seized by an angelic desire to do good, she did not spurn his love!

"Yes," said he, "this Neapolitan, this handsome comte she scorns, really loves her. His passion is nobler than mine: to save Alicia, he has not feared to approach me in order to provoke me—me, a jettatore, that is to say, in his opinion, a being to be dreaded as much as the devil himself. While speaking to me, he toyed with the charms on his watch-chain, and the eyes of this celebrated duelist, who has killed three men in his time, lowered themselves before mine!"

On reaching the Hotel de Rome, Paul wrote a number of letters, and then made his will, in which he bequeathed to Miss Alicia Ward all his worldly possessions, with the exception of a legacy for Paddy.

Then he opened the oak chest in which he kept his weapons; it was separated into little compartments in which were placed swords, pistols, and hunting-knives. He selected two Corsican stilettos, of equal size, after due deliberation.

They were long, two-edged blades of finely-tempered Damascus steel, curious and terrible weapons in the hands of desperate men. Paul also selected three silk scarfs of equal length.

He then notified Scazzigo to be in readiness to drive him into the country early in the morning.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, throwing himself upon his bed, "may God will it that this combat proves fatal to me! For if I have the good fortune to be killed—Alicia will live!"

Chapter XIII

SKELETON OF A CITY

Pompeii, the dead city, does not wake up at daybreak like the living cities, and although she has partly thrown aside the mantle of cinders which had covered her during so many centuries, she still sleeps on her funeral pyre long after the sun has risen in the heavens.

The tourists of all nations, who visit the city of the dead during the day, are still soundly sleeping in their beds, all worn out with the exertions of their excursions, and as the sun rises over the gigantic tomb it does not light up a single human entrance. The lizards, alone, wriggle their tails as they glide along the walls or over disjointed mosaics, without stopping to read the *cave canem* inscribed on the doors of the deserted houses. These are the inhabitants who have succeeded the ancient citizens, and it seems as if Pompeii had been exhumed solely for their benefit.

It is a strange sight to behold in the dim light of morning—the skeleton of this city, which was destroyed in the midst of its pleasures, its work, and its civilization. One momentarily expects to see the proprietors of these deserted houses appear in the doorway attired in Greek or Roman costume, and the chariots, of which the tracks are plainly discernible on the flag-stones, to move; the tipplers enter the thermopoles, where the marks of the cups are still imprinted on the marble counter. One walks as in a dream through the past; the bill of the spectacle in red letters is posted on the walls—only the spectacle has taken place more than seventeen centuries ago! In the uncertain light of the morning, the figures of the dancing girls, painted on the walls, seem to wave their crotalums as they raise the thin drapery with the tips of their toes, believing, no doubt, that the torch bearers would light up the triclinium for an orgie; the Venuses, the Satyrs, and the heroic or grotesque figures, animated by a ray of light, apparently replaced the dispersed inhabitants, as they gave an almost realistic appearance to the deserted city. The colored shadows flicker on the walls, and for several minutes the mind willingly lends itself to this ancient phantasmagoria. But that morning, to the great surprise of the lizards, the usual matinal serenity of Pompeii was disturbed by a strange visitor: a carriage drove up to the former main entrance of the city, and Paul, alighting, directed his steps towards the rendezvous on foot.

He was so deeply absorbed, however, that he did not heed this city of fallen grandeur. Was it the thought of the impending combat which preoccupied him thus? Not at all. He was not even thinking of that; his thoughts were far away. In his mind he recalled his first meeting with Miss Ward in Richmond; she was dressed in white, and had a bunch of jasmine blossoms in her hair. How young, how beautiful and sprightly she had seemed to him then!

The ancient baths are at the end of the Consular quarter, near the residence of Diomedes and Mammia's sepulchre; M. d'Aspremont had no difficulty in finding them. It was here that the women of Pompeii used to come after the bath to dry their beautiful bodies. readjust their head-dresses, and resume their tunics and their stereotyped smiles in the polished brass mirrors of the period. Quite another scene was to be enacted in the thermæ, and blood would stain the marble mosaics where perfumed waters once were wont to flow.

A few moments later Comte d'Altavilla appeared. He carried a pistol case in his hand, and two swords under his arm. He did not believe the conditions proposed by M. d'Aspremont to be serious; he looked upon them purely as a bit of mephistophelean sarcasm.

"What do you intend doing with these pistols and swords, Comte?" questioned Paul. "I thought we had fully agreed on the weapons we are to use?"

"Undoubtedly; but I thought it quite possible that you would change your mind. No one has ever fought such a duel as you propose."

"Even were we fully equal in skill, I would have an advantage over you," replied Paul with a bitter smile; "and I do not wish to abuse this advantage. Here are a couple of Corsican stilettos; pray examine them—they are of equal weight and length—and here a couple of silk scarfs with which to blindfold ourselves. See, they are very thick, and *my glance* will hardly pierce the material."

The Comte d'Altavilla nodded his head approvingly.

"We have no witnesses," continued Paul, "and one of us must never leave this vault alive. Let us each write a note, attesting the loyalty of the duel; the victor will pin it on the dead man's breast."

"A wise precaution," answered the Neapolitan with a smile, as he traced a few lines on a page of Paul's memorandum book, after which the latter went through the same formality.

This accomplished, the two adversaries, flinging aside their coats, proceeded to blindfold themselves, and, arming themselves with their stilettos, they each took a firm hold on the silk scarf.

"Are you ready?" asked M. d'Aspremont of the Comte d'Altavilla.

"Yes," replied the Neapolitan, who was perfectly composed.

Don Felipe d'Altavilla's bravery was not to be questioned; all he feared was the jettatura, and this blind combat, from which other men would have recoiled in horror, did not give him the slightest fear. He simply staked his life at head or tails, without being compelled to undergo the torture of having his foe's fatal glance directed upon him.

The duellists flourished their stilettos, and the scarf which linked them together was strained to its utmost tension. By an instinctive movement, both Paul and the Comte had thrown their bodies backward, the only attitude possible in such a duel; their arms circled through the empty air, and that was all.

This blind struggle, where each had a presentiment of death without seeing it coming, was indeed terrible. Silently and furiously the two foes retreated, sprang forward and retreated again, at times almost upsetting one another in the darkness, as they struck out again and again with their stilettos without injuring each other.

At one moment, d'Altavilla felt the point of his stiletto striking against something; he halted, supposing that he killed his rival, and waited for the sound of his falling body;—but he had only struck the wall!

"By Heaven! I thought I had run you through," he exclaimed, as he recovered his guard.

"Do not speak," said Paul, "your voice guides me."

And the combat recommenced.

Suddenly the rivals felt themselves

detached from one another. A blow of Paul's stiletto had severed the scarf.

"A truce!" exclaimed the Neapolitan; "the scarf has parted!"

"What matters that? Let us continue," replied Paul.

A painful silence followed. Like honorable men that they were, neither M. d'Aspremont nor the Comte wished to take the advantage of the sound of the voice caused by this brief exchange of words, to precipitate the attack. They took a few paces to one side in order to throw each other off the track, then they retraced their steps and began hunting for each other in the darkness.

Paul displaced a little stone with his foot; this slight noise revealed to the Neapolitan the direction his foe was taking. Raising himself on his tiptoes in order to obtain more momentum, Altavilla bounded forward with the fury of a tiger, and brought up against M. d'Aspremont's stiletto.

Paul touched the point of his weapon —it was wet—unsteady steps resounded on the flag-stones; a heavy sigh was heard, followed by the noise of a falling body.

Terrified beyond measure, Paul tore the handkerchief from his eyes, and beheld the Comte d'Altavilla, pale and motionless, stretched out on his back, his shirt stained with his life-blood.

The handsome Neapolitan was dead!

M. d'Aspremont placed the note d'Altavilla had written, attesting the loyalty of the combat, on his breast, and left the thermæ with a heavy heart, while his face was even whiter than that of the dead nobleman who was lying there on the cold marble slabs.

Chapter XIV

USELESS SACRIFICE

Towards two o'clock in the afternoon, a number of English tourists visited the ruins of Pompeii; the party, which was composed of the father, mother, three daughters, two little boys and a cousin, had already cast a careless look about the ruins, characteristic of the British *ennui,* almost without halting to admire the grandeur of the amphitheatre, and of the theatres, so curiously juxtaposed; of the military quarters, chalked with caricatures by the guards during their leisure moments; the forum, the temples of Venus and Jupiter, the basilica and the Pantheon. They silently studied their *Murrays,* while the cicerone eloquently described the ruins, and they scarcely condescended to notice the broken columns, the fragments of statues, the mosaics, the frescoes, and the inscriptions.

They finally reached the ancient baths, discovered in 1824, as the guide saw fit to remark. "Here were the vapor baths, there the boiler in which the water was heated, and, further on, the drying room"; these details given in the Neapolitan *patois,* mixed with a few sentences in broken English, evidently did not interest the visitors, for they were going to take their departure, when suddenly Miss Ethelwina, the eldest of the daughters, a charming blonde with freckled face, started back, partly through fear and partly through modesty, as she cried out: "A man!"

"It is no doubt some workman employed by the government to unearth the ruins, who is taking his afternoon *siesta,* so don't be alarmed, my lady," said the guide, as he applied the tip of his boot to the inanimate body stretched out at full length on the ground. "Hola! I say there, wake up, you lazy clown, and permit their graces to pass."

But the sleeper did not stir.

"The man is not asleep—he is dead," said one of the sons who was in advance of the party.

The cicerone stooped down, but he started back in horror as he exclaimed: "The man has been murdered!"

"It is positively shocking that one is compelled to look upon such ghastly objects; Ethelwina, Kitty, Bessie, stand aside," remarked Mrs. Bracebridge; "it is not proper for young ladies to look at such a disgusting sight. Haven't they any police in this country? The coroner should have removed the body long ago."

"Ah! a paper!" laconically remarked the cousin, a long-legged, awkward fellow after the style of the Laird of Dumbiedike in "The Edinburgh Jail."

"So it is," added the guide, as he picked up the paper on d'Altavilla's breast; "and there is writing on it, too."

"Then read it," exclaimed the tourists as with one voice, their curiosity being aroused.

"It is useless to seek or annoy any one on account of my death. If this note is found on my wound I shall have fallen in a fair duel.

(*Signed*) Felipe, Comte d'Altavilla.

"He was a gentleman after all; what a pity!" sighed Mrs. Bracebridge, impressed by the title.

"And such a handsome man," murmured Miss Ethelwina, the young lady with the freckles.

"Surely, you can't complain now," whispered Bessie to Kitty; "you are always grumbling because we have had such an uninteresting voyage; we have not, it is true, been stopped by brigands on the road from Terracine to Fondi, but we have found a young nobleman, pierced through the heart by a blow from a stiletto in the ruins of Pompeii—and that ought to be romantic enough, I'm sure. Some love affair is back of this, no doubt, and we will have something startling to tell our friends on our return. I will sketch the scene in my album, and you will add a few mournful verses, *à la* Byron."

"I don't care," interrupted the guide, "it was a fair blow—he was struck square in the heart; there is no fault to be found."

Such was the funeral oration of the Comte d'Altavilla.

Some workmen, notified by the cicerone, hurried off to warn the authorities, and the body of the unfortunate Comte was carried to his chateau near Salerno.

As to M. d'Aspremont, he had regained his carriage, and, although his eyes were wide open, he could not see—he walked like a somnambulist in his sleep. He was like an animated statue. Although he was inspired with religious horror at the sight of the dead man, still he did not consider himself guilty. Provoked by the Comte to fight, he had no other course to pursue than to accept, and yet he had only decided to fight in the hope that he would be the victim. Gifted with a fatal glance, he had insisted that both combatants be blindfolded so that fate alone should be responsible for the result. He had not even struck the blow; his enemy had impaled himself upon his weapon! He bemoaned the death of the Comte d'Altavilla precisely as he would have done had he not been accountable for his death. "It is my stiletto that killed him," he reasoned, "but if I had looked at him in a ball-room one of the chandeliers would have fallen on him from the ceiling and would have crushed him beneath its weight. I am as innocent as the lightning, the avalanche, or the machineel tree—as unconscious, in fact, of the harm I occasion as any of these destructive powers. The lightning, however, is not aware that it kills, while I, an intelligent creature, know the fatal power I possess. It seems as if I had no right to linger on this earth where I cause so many misfortunes! Would God damn me forever if I committed suicide in order to save my fellow-beings from destruction? It seems as if this would be pardonable in the present case. But what if I should be mistaken? Then I could not even look upon Alicia in the next world, where the eyes of the souls are not accursed with the fatal fascino. This is a chance I don't propose to run."

A sudden thought flashed through the mind of the unfortunate jettatore and interrupted his revery. His features seemed to grow softer, and they relaxed their severity as they assumed an expression of determination. He had taken a final resolution.

"A curse be on my eyes, since they are murderous! but, before closing forever, saturate yourselves with light, gaze on the sun, on the blue sky, the immense sea, and the chains of mountains: contemplate the green trees, the infinite horizon, the columns of the palace, the fisherman's hut; the far-off islands of the gulf, the white sails which brighten the horizon, and Vesuvius with her smoking crater; gaze upon all these sights, and remember them well, for you will never feast upon this beautiful vision again; study every form, and every color—treat yourselves to this gorgeous spectacle, intoxicate yourselves with the beauties of the earth—for it is for the last time! Go on! enjoy yourselves! The curtain will soon fall between you and the picturesque scenery and the beauties of the universe!"

At this moment the carriage was following the beach; the beautiful bay was looking at its best, and the sky seemed to have been sculptured out of a single block of sapphire.

Paul asked the driver to stop, and, getting out of the carriage, he seated himself on a rock, from whence he gazed long and earnestly at the surroundings as if he wished to impress them upon his memory. His eyes bathed themselves in the light, and the sun, shining brighter than ever, seemed to impart some of its brilliancy to them! There would be no dawn to the night which was to follow!

Tearing himself away from this silent contemplation, M. d'Aspremont entered the carriage and directed Scazziga to drive to the white villa near Sorrento.

He found Alicia reclining on the lounge, exactly as he had left her the day before. Paul seated himself opposite to her, but this time he did not lower his eyes as he had been accustomed to do since he first acquired the knowledge of his fatal power.

Alicia's beauty was perfect even in her agony; the woman had almost disappeared, making way for the angelic being. Her skin was transparent, ethereal, and luminous; one could see her soul shining through the frail form like the light of an alabaster lamp. Her eyes had the tender blue of the sky in them, and scintillated like two bright stars; life scarcely placed its red signature upon the carnation of her lips.

A divine smile illuminated her mouth, like a ray of the sun about a rose, as her affianced husband turned his eyes lovingly upon her. She imagined that Paul had at last dismissed the thought that he was accursed from his mind, and she once more beheld the Paul of former days. She held out her pale, wan hand, which he eagerly clasped in his own.

"So you are no longer afraid of me?" she said with a sweet smile, as Paul continued to gaze upon her.

"Oh! let me look at you," answered M. d'Aspremont in a strange tone, kneeling beside the sofa; "let my eyes feast themselves upon your intoxicating beauty!" and he contemplated Alicia's raven-black hair, her white brow, which was as pure as Grecian marble, her dark blue eyes, her finely shaped nose, her mouth with its two rows of pearls, and her swan-like neck; he seemed to make a note of every feature and every detail, like a painter who desires to retain a picture in his mind.

Alicia was fascinated by his burning glance, and experienced a painful, almost fatal sensation—the dying embers of her life were fanned into a momentary flame; she turned red and white by turns, and from ice she suddenly turned to fire. Another moment, and her soul would have left her forever.

She placed her hands over Paul's eyes, but the young man's glance darted through her transparent fingers like a flash of lightning.

"Now that I have seen her again, what care I for my eyesight? Her portrait is imprinted upon my heart," Paul muttered as he took his departure.

That night, after having gazed at the setting sun—the last sunset he would ever behold—M. d'Aspremont rang for a chafing-dish and some charcoal.

"I wonder if he is going to asphyxiate himself?" grumbled Virgilio Falsacappa as he handed Paddy the coal and the chafing-dish his master had sent for. "It's about the best thing the cursed jettatore could do!"

But such was not d'Aspremont's intention, for he opened the window and lighting the coals, plunged the blade of a stiletto into the flame.

The fine blade, embedded as it was in this incandescent heat, was soon red-hot. Paul leaned on the mantelpiece and gazed at himself in the mirror.

"Farewell, accursed features! this horrible mask will soon disappear forever! I am going to plunge you into the darkness of the night, and before long I shall have forgotten your fatal charm as completely as though it had never existed. It will be useless to cry out, 'Hubert, Hubert, my poor eyes! for that will not alter my determination. Now then, to work!" and casting one last, sweeping glance in the mirror he approached the lighted fire

He blew his breath upon the embers and took the dagger by the handle, the blade of which emitted little white sparks.

At this decisive moment, although fully determined to carry his plan into execution, M. d'Aspremont felt his heart sinking within him, while a cold sweat bathed his temples; but with a superhuman effort he recovered his self-possession, and passed the hot blade before his eyes.

A sharp, tearing, lacerating pain almost caused him to cry out; it seemed as if two drops of molten lead had been dropped in his eyes and, burning through his eyeballs, had forced their way to the back of his head; the dagger fell from his open hand and made a deep burn in the carpet.

A thick, compact darkness, compared with which the darkest night was as daylight, enveloped him in its black mantle; he turned his head in the direction of the mantelpiece, where the candles were still burning brightly, but an impenetrable, dense obscurity surrounded him on every side. The sacrifice was consummated!

"And now, sweet and noble creature," murmured Paul, "I can become your husband without the fear of becoming your assassin as well. You will no longer wilt away under the magic fascino of my fatal glance—you will regain your health and former beauty. Alas! I can no longer see you, it is true, but your sainted image is forever imprinted on my heart; and although I will see you only in my fancy, still your sweet voice will reach my ear. Sometimes, too, you will let your hand linger in mine to assure me of your presence, you will condescend to lead your poor, blind husband when he falters in the darkness of an eternal night; you will read poetry and you will describe all the celebrated paintings and statues to him. Through the sound of your loving voice, you will restore to him the lost treasures of the world; you will be his one thought, his only dream; deprived of the sunlight and the enjoyment of the beauties of this earth, his soul will fly towards you for consolation!

"I do not regret my sacrifice, since you are saved—and, after all, what have I lost? The monotonous spectacle of the different seasons, the sight of more or less picturesque places where the hundred different acts of the comedy of life are daily enacted for the edification of millions of souls. The earth, the sky, the sea, the mountains, the trees, the flowers—a vulgar show, a repetition of the same old things day after day! When one is beloved, one possesses the real sun, the brightness of which is never dimmed by passing clouds!"

So spoke the unfortunate Paul d'Aspremont, feverish and delirious with pain and exaltation.

His suffering gradually diminished; then he dropped off into that heavy sleep which is the brother of death, and which, like death, brings consolation.

He was not aroused by the light of day which streamed through the open curtains of his room. Henceforth, midnight and noon would be alike to him; but the clocks chiming the Angelus rumbled in his ears, until, becoming gradually more distinct, they awoke him from his drowsiness.

He attempted to move his eyelids, and before he knew it the pain suddenly reminded him of his sacrifice. His eyes encountered nothing but darkness, and it seemed as if he had been buried alive; but he soon recovered his composure. For was it not destined that his life should be ever thus? Henceforth, the light of the morning and the darkness of the night would be alike to him.

He groped around in the darkness for the bell-rope, and Paddy made his appearance in answer to this summons.

"I foolishly slept with the window open," said Paul, in order to avoid an explanation, "and I believe I have caught the gutta serena, but it will soon pass away, I suppose. Kindly lead me to the basin and fill a tumbler with fresh water forthwith."

Paddy, with the discretion so becoming in an English valet, made no comment, and, after executing his master's commands, retired.

Left to himself, Paul dipped his handkerchief in the cold water and applied it to his eyes in order to cool the burn.

We will leave M. d'Aspremont, thus painfully occupied, while we will rejoin some of the other personages who have figured in this story.

The news of Comte d'Altavilla's strange death spread like wildfire through the city and was the subject of a thousand different conjectures. The Comte's ability as a swordsman was well known. D'Altavilla had the reputation of being one of the best fencers of the Neapolitan school; he had killed three men, and he had seriously wounded five or six more. The most celebrated duellists, therefore, took particular pains not to offend him. Now, if one of these swaggerers had killed d'Altavilla, he certainly would not have hesitated to proclaim his prowess. And yet the note found on his body diverted all thoughts of murder. At first the handwriting was questioned, but it was compared to some of his letters by experts, who pronounced the writing to be the same. Again, the handkerchief tied about his head could in no way be accounted for. Then, two stilettos were found in the ruins near the body, while a couple of swords and pistols were discovered a little further off.

The news of his death finally reached Vicè's ears, and she lost no time in informing Sir Joshua Ward. The Commodore suddenly remembered his conversation with d'Altavilla, when the latter mysteriously hinted that he had a plan by which Alicia could be saved. In his imagination, he beheld the Comte and M. d'Aspremont engaged in the deadly struggle. As to Vicè, she did not hesitate to attribute the death of the handsome Neapolitan to the fatal influence of the fascino. And yet, Paul had paid his respects to Miss Ward at the usual hour, and there was nothing in his appearance to betray the part he had acted in the terrible drama; on the contrary, he appeared even more gay than usual.

M. d'Aspremont did not call that day, and the news of the Comte's death was carefully withheld from Alicia.

Paul did not wish to present himself with his red eyes, as he proposed to attribute his sudden blindness to another cause. The following day, however, his eyes having ceased to pain him, he asked Paddy to accompany him for a drive.

The carriage stopped, as usual, before the terrace. The blind man kicked open the door with his foot, and was soon treading the well-known path. Vicè had not hastened to meet him as was her wont when the bell, set in motion by the opening and closing of the door, notified her of the approach of a visitor; none of the joyful sounds which formerly burst upon his ear reached him now, but instead a frightful, death-like silence reigned supreme. This silence, which would have oppressed even a man who could see, struck apprehension and nameless fear to the heart of the poor, groping Paul.

The branches which he could no longer see appeared anxious to retain him; they stretched forth, like so many arms, attempting to bar his passage. The laurel-bushes got in his way, the rose-bushes fastened themselves on his clothes, the vines seized him about the legs, while the birds seemed to twitter, "Why do you come here, poor unfortunate? Do not attempt to force your way through the obstructions nature has placed in your path—go away!" But Paul did not heed the warning, and, tormented by a terrible presentiment, he hurled himself against the opposing shrubbery—heedless of the laurel and the rose bushes he destroyed in his mad onslaught—while he continued to force his way toward the villa.

Torn and scratched by the overhanging branches, he finally reached the end of the arbor. A gust of fresh air struck him in the face, and he continued his way with his hands stretched out before him.

He found the wall, and finally the door, after a difficult search.

He entered; no kindly voice gave him a welcome. There was no sound to guide him. For a moment he stood, hesitating, in the doorway. An odor of ether, of wax in combustion, and the aromatic perfumes of a death-chamber reached the intruder's nostrils as he stood there, hesitating and trembling on the threshold; a frightful thought suddenly crossed his mind, and he entered the room.

He advanced a few steps—then he struck against something which fell on the floor with a loud noise. Stooping down, he took it up: by its touch he recognized it to be a long metallic candlestick, similar to the ones used in churches.

With throbbing heart, he continued his way through the darkness. He seemed to hear a voice offering up a prayer to Heaven; he took another step forward, and his hands encountered the foot-board of a bed; he leaned over, and his fingers touched a motionless body at first; then a wreath of roses and a face as pure and cold as marble.

It was Alicia laid out in her funeral robes.

"Dead!" shrieked Paul, as he realized the truth at last; "dead! and it is I who have killed her!"

The Commodore, frozen with horror, had seen this spectre, with its sightless eyes, as it staggered across the room, and finally came to a standstill before the bed in which his niece was lying: he had understood.

The grandeur of this useless sacrifice caused the tears to rush to the old man's eyes.

Paul fell on his knees beside the bed, while he covered Alicia's cold hand with burning, passionate kisses; his body shook with emotion. His sorrow even moved the ferocious Vicè, who stood respectfully by the side of the bed, watching her mistress's last sleep.

After he had bid his love farewell, M. d'Aspremont rose and, advancing towards the door, went out. His eyes, which were wide open, exposing the red scar caused by the burns, presented an unnatural expression; although he was blind, one would have believed he had the gift of sight. He crossed the terrace, without halting once, and walked out into the country, sometimes disturbing a stone with his foot, and sometimes stopping as if to catch a distant sound—but he continued on his way.

The noise made by the waves as they washed ashore grew more distinct, while the sea-gulls uttered plaintive cries which sounded mournfully indeed as the sighing of the wind and the rush of the waters burst upon his ear.

Paul was soon standing on an overhanging rock. The rolling of the waves, and the salted rain which beat upon his face should have warned him of the danger he was running; but he heeded not the warning; a strange smile flitted across his pale lips, and he continued on his way, although he knew the gulf was beneath his feet.

Suddenly, he lost his balance and fell; a gigantic wave seized him in its embrace and carried him backwards in its mad rush.

Then the storm burst forth in all its fury; the waves beat upon the beach in rapid succession, like a phalanx of cavalry storming a fortress, while they cast the spray high into the air; the black clouds, tinged with fire, emitted sulphurous vapors; the crater of Vesuvius grew brighter, and a variegated cloud hovered over the volcano. The barks anchored off the shore collided together with a mournful sound, while their cables, strained to their utmost tension, creaked ominously. Then the rain began to fall in torrents, cutting the faces of the people like so much fine glass—it seemed as if the chaos wished to conquer nature and once more confound the elements.

M. Paul d'Aspremont's body was never found, although the Commodore offered a large reward for its recovery.

An ebony coffin, with silver handles, lined with quilted satin—in fact, just such a coffin as Clarissa Harlowe recommended to the care of "the carpenter,"—was taken on board a yacht by the Commodore and carried to England, where it was placed in the family vault in Lincolnshire. It contained all that was earthly of Miss Alicia Ward, who was beautiful even in death.

A remarkable change has taken place in the Commodore. His superb *embonpoint* has completely disappeared. He no longer takes Jamaica rum in his tea, eats but little, and has very little to say; and the contrast between his white whiskers and his sunburnt face no longer exists—the Commodore has forever lost his ruddy color.

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The Mummy's Foot

CHAPTER I

THE SHOP OF CURIOSITIES

I HAD entered, in an idle mood, the shop of one of those curiosity venders who are called *marchands de bric-à-brac* in that Parisian *argot* which is so perfectly unintelligible elsewhere in France.

You have doubtless glanced occasionally through the windows of some of these shops, which have become so numerous now that it is fashionable to buy antiquated furniture, and that every petty stock broker thinks he must have his *chambre au moyen âge*.

There is one thing there which clings alike to the shop of the dealer in old iron, the ware-room of the tapestry maker, the laboratory of the chemist, and the studio of the painter: in all those gloomy dens where a furtive daylight filters in through the window-shutters the most manifestly ancient thing is dust. The cobwebs are more authentic than the guimp laces, and the old pear-tree furniture on exhibition is actually younger than the mahogany which arrived but yesterday from America.

The warehouse of my bric-à-brac dealer was a veritable Capharnaum. All ages and all nations seemed to have made their rendezvous there. An Etruscan lamp of red clay stood upon a Boule cabinet, with ebony panels, brightly striped by lines of inlaid brass; a duchess of the court of Louis XV. nonchalantly extended her fawn-like feet under a massive table of the time of Louis XIII., with heavy spiral supports of oak, and carven designs of chimeras and foliage intermingled.

Upon the denticulated shelves of several sideboards glittered immense Japanese dishes with red and blue designs relieved by gilded hatching, side by side with enamelled works by Bernard Palissy, representing serpents, frogs, and lizards in relief.

From disembowelled cabinets escaped cascades of silver-lustrous Chinese silks and waves of tinsels which an oblique sunbeam shot through with luminous beads; while portraits of every era, in frames more or less tarnished, smiled through their yellow varnish.

The striped breastplate of a damascened suit of Milanese armour glittered in one corner; loves and nymphs of porcelain, Chinese grotesques, vases of *céladon* and crackle-ware, Saxon and old Sèvres cups encumbered the shelves and nooks of the apartment.

The dealer followed me closely through the tortuous way contrived between the piles of furniture, warding off with his hand the hazardous sweep of my coat-skirts, watching my elbows with the uneasy attention of an antiquarian and a usurer.

It was a singular face, that of the merchant; an immense skull, polished like a knee, and surrounded by a thin aureole of white hair, which brought out the clear salmon tint of his complexion all the more strikingly, lent him a false aspect of patriarchal *bonhomie*, counteracted, however, by the scintillation of two little yellow eyes which trembled in their orbits like two louis d'or upon quicksilver. The curve of his nose presented an aquiline silhouette, which suggested the Oriental or Jewish type. His hands—thin, slender, full of nerves which projected like strings upon the finger-board of a violin, and armed with claws like those on the terminations of bats' wings—shook with senile trembling; but those convulsively agitated hands became firmer than steel pincers or lobsters' claws when they lifted any precious article—an onyx cup, a Venetian glass, or a dish of Bohemian crystal. This strange old man had an aspect so thoroughly rabbinical and cabalistic that he would have been burnt on the mere testimony of his face three centuries ago.

"Will you not buy something from me to-day, sir? Here is a Malay kreese with a blade undulating like flame. Look at those grooves contrived for the blood to run along, those teeth set backward so as to tear out the entrails in withdrawing the weapon. It is a fine character of ferocious arm, and will look well in your collection. This two-handed sword is very beautiful. It is the work of Josepe de la Hera; and this *colichemarde,* with its fenestrated guard—what a superb specimen of handicraft!"

"No; I have quite enough weapons and instruments of carnage. I want a small figure, something which will suit me as a paper-weight, for I cannot endure those trumpery bronzes which the stationers sell, and which may be found on everybody's desk."

The old gnome foraged among his ancient wares, and finally arranged before me some antique bronzes, so-called at least; fragments of malachite, little Hindoo or Chinese idols, a kind of poussah-toys in jade-stone, representing the incarnations of Brahma or Vishnoo, and wonderfully appropriate to the very undivine office of holding papers and letters in place.

I was hesitating between a porcelain dragon, all constellated with warts, its mouth formidable with bristling tusks and ranges of teeth, and an abominable little Mexican fetich, representing the god Vitziliputzili *au naturel,* when I caught sight of a charming foot, which I at first took for a fragment of some antique Venus.

It had those beautiful ruddy and tawny tints that lend to Florentine bronze that warm living look so much preferable to the gray-green aspect of common bronzes, which might easily be mistaken for statues in a state of putrefaction. Satiny gleams played over its rounded forms, doubtless polished by the amorous kisses of twenty centuries, for it seemed a Corinthian bronze, a work of the best era of art, perhaps moulded by Lysippus himself.

"That foot will be my choice," I said to the merchant, who regarded me with an ironical and saturnine air, and held out the object desired that I might examine it more fully.

I was surprised at its lightness. It was not a foot of metal, but in sooth a foot of flesh, an embalmed foot, a mummy's foot. On examining it still more closely the very grain of the skin, and the almost imperceptible lines impressed upon it by the texture of bandages, became perceptible. The toes were slender and delicate, and terminated by perfectly formed nails, pure and transparent as agates. The great toe, slightly separated from the rest, afforded a happy contrast, in the antique style, to the position of the other toes, and lent it an aërial lightness—the grace of a bird's foot. The sole, scarcely streaked by a few almost imperceptible cross lines, afforded evidence that it had never touched the bare ground, and had only come in contact with the finest matting of Nile rushes and the softest carpets of panther skin.

"Ha, ha, you want the foot of the Princess Hermonthis!" exclaimed the merchant, with a strange giggle, fixing his owlish eyes upon me. "Ha, ha, ha! For a paper-weight! An original idea! —an artistic idea! Old Pharaoh would certainly have been surprised had some one told him that the foot of his adored daughter would be used for a paper-weight after he had had a mountain of granite hollowed out as a receptacle for the triple coffin, painted and gilded, covered with hieroglyphics and beautiful paintings of the Judgment of Souls," continued the queer little merchant, half audibly, as though talking to himself.

"How much will you charge me for this mummy fragment?"

"Ah, the highest price I can get, for it is a superb piece. If I had the match of it you could not have it for less than five hundred francs. The daughter of a Pharaoh! Nothing is more rare."

"Assuredly that is not a common article, but still, how much do you want? In the first place let me warn you that all my wealth consists of just five louis. I can buy anything that costs five louis, but nothing dearer. You might search my vest pockets and most secret drawers without even finding one poor five-franc piece more."

"Five louis for the foot of the Princess Hermonthis! That is very little, very little indeed. 'Tis an authentic foot," muttered the merchant, shaking his head, and imparting a peculiar rotary motion to his eyes. "Well, take it, and I will give you the bandages into the bargain," he added, wrapping the foot in an ancient damask rag. "Very fine! Real damask—Indian damask which has never been re-dyed. It is strong, and yet it is soft," he mumbled, stroking the frayed tissue with his fingers, through the trade-acquired habit which moved him to praise even an object of such little value that he himself deemed it only worth the giving away.

He poured the gold coins into a sort of mediæval alms-purse hanging at his belt, repeating:

"The foot of the Princess Hermonthis to be used for a paper-weight!"

Then turning his phosphorescent eyes upon me, he exclaimed in a voice strident as the crying of a cat which has swallowed a fish-bone:

"Old Pharaoh will not be well pleased. He loved his daughter, the dear man!"

"You speak as if you were a contemporary of his. You are old enough, goodness knows! but you do not date back to the Pyramids of Egypt," I answered, laughingly, from the threshold.

I went home, delighted with my acquisition.

With the idea of putting it to profitable use as soon as possible, I placed the foot of the divine Princess Hermonthis upon a heap of papers scribbled over with verses, in themselves an undecipherable mosaic work of erasures;

articles freshly begun; letters forgotten, and posted in the table drawer instead of the letter-box, an error to which absent-minded people are peculiarly liable. The effect was charming, *bizarre,* and romantic.

Well satisfied with this embellishment, I went out with the gravity and pride becoming one who feels that he has the ineffable advantage over all the passers-by whom he elbows, of possessing a piece of the Princess Hermonthis, daughter of Pharaoh.

I looked upon all who did not possess, like myself, a paper-weight so authentically Egyptian as very ridiculous people, and it seemed to me that the proper occupation of every sensible man should consist in the mere fact of having a mummy's foot upon his desk.

Happily I met some friends, whose presence distracted me in my infatuation with this new acquisition. I went to dinner with them, for I could not very well have dined with myself.

Chapter II

ASTONISHMENT

When I came back that evening, with my brain slightly confused by a few glasses of wine, a vague whiff of Oriental perfume delicately titillated my olfactory nerves. The heat of the room had warmed the natron, bitumen, and myrrh in which the *paraschistes,* who cut open the bodies of the dead, had bathed the corpse of the princess. It was a perfume at once sweet and penetrating, a perfume that four thousand years had not been able to dissipate.

The Dream of Egypt was Eternity. Her odours have the solidity of granite and endure as long.

I soon drank deeply from the black cup of sleep. For a few hours all remained opaque to me. Oblivion and nothingness inundated me with their sombre waves.

Yet light gradually dawned upon the darkness of my mind. Dreams commenced to touch me softly in their silent flight.

The eyes of my soul were opened, and I beheld my chamber as it actually was. I might have believed myself awake but for a vague consciousness which assured me that I slept, and that something fantastic was about to take place.

The odour of the myrrh had augmented in intensity, and I felt a slight headache, which I very naturally attributed to several glasses of champagne that we had drunk to the unknown gods and our future fortunes.

I peered through my room with a feeling of expectation which I saw nothing to justify. Every article of furniture was in its proper place. The lamp, softly shaded by its globe of ground cystal, burned upon its bracket; the water-colour sketches shone under their Bohemian glass; the curtains hung down languidly; everything wore an aspect of tranquil slumber.

After a few moments, however, all this calm interior appeared to become disturbed. The woodwork cracked stealthily, the ash-covered log suddenly emitted a jet of blue flame, and the disks of the pateras seemed like great metallic eyes, watching, like myself, for the things which were about to happen.

My eyes accidentally fell upon the desk where I had placed the foot of the Princess Hermonthis.

Instead of remaining quiet, as behooved a foot which had been embalmed for four thousand years, it commenced to act in a nervous manner, contracted itself, and leaped over the papers like a startled frog. One would have imagined that it had suddenly been brought into contact with a galvanic battery. I could distinctly hear the dry sound made by its little heel, hard as the hoof of a gazelle.

I became rather discontented with my acquisition, inasmuch as I wished my paper-weights to be of a sedentary disposition, and thought it very unnatural that feet should walk about without legs, then I commenced to experience a feeling closely akin to fear.

Suddenly I saw the folds of my bed-curtain stir, and heard a bumping sound, like that caused by some person hopping on one foot across the floor. I must confess I became alternately hot and cold, that I felt a strange wind chill my back, and that my suddenly rising hair caused my night-cap to execute a leap of several yards.

The bed-curtains opened and I beheld the strangest figure imaginable before me.

It was a young girl of a very deep coffee-brown complexion, like the bayadere Amani, and possessing the purest Egyptian type of perfect beauty. Her eyes were almond-shaped and oblique, with eyebrows so black that they seemed blue; her nose was exquisitely chiselled, almost Greek in its delicacy of outline; and she might indeed have been taken for a Corinthian statue of bronze but for the prominence of her cheek-bones and the slightly African fulness of her lips, which compelled one to recognize her as belonging beyond all doubt to the hieroglyphic race which dwelt upon the banks of the Nile.

Her arms, slender and spindle-shaped like those of very young girls, were encircled by a peculiar kind of metal bands and bracelets of glass beads; her hair was all twisted into little cords, and she wore upon her bosom a little idol-figure of green paste, bearing a whip with seven lashes, which proved it to be an image of Isis; her brow was adorned with a shining plate of gold, and a few traces of paint relieved the coppery tint of her cheeks.

As for her costume, it was very odd indeed.

Fancy a *pagne,* or skirt, all formed of little strips of material bedizened with red and black hieroglyphics, stiffened with bitumen, and apparently belonging to a freshly unbandaged mummy.

In one of those sudden flights of thought so common in dreams I heard the hoarse falsetto of the bric-à-brac dealer, repeating like a monotonous refrain the phrase he had uttered in his shop with so enigmatical an intonation:

"Old Pharaoh will not be well pleased. He loved his daughter, the dear man!"

One strange circumstance, which was not at all calculated to restore my equanimity, was that the apparition had but one foot; the other was broken off at the ankle!

She approached the table where the foot was starting and fidgetting about more than ever, and there supported herself upon the edge of the desk. I saw her eyes fill with pearly gleaming tears.

Although she had not as yet spoken, I fully comprehended the thoughts which agitated her. She looked at her foot—for it was indeed her own—with an exquisitely graceful expression of coquettish sadness, but the foot leaped and ran hither and thither, as though impelled on steel springs.

Twice or thrice she extended her hand to seize it, but could not succeed.

Then commenced between the Princess Hermonthis and her foot—which appeared to be endowed with a special life of its own—a very fantastic dialogue in a most ancient Coptic tongue, such as might have been spoken thirty centuries ago in the syrinxes of the land of Ser. Luckily I understood Coptic perfectly well that night.

The Princess Hermonthis cried, in a voice sweet and vibrant as the tones of a crystal bell:

"Well, my dear little foot, you always flee from me, yet I always took good care of you. I bathed you with perfumed water in a bowl of alabaster; I smoothed your heel with pumice-stone mixed with palm oil; your nails were cut with golden scissors and polished with a hippopotamus tooth; I was careful to select *tatbebs* for you, painted and embroidered and turned up at the toes, which were the envy of all the young girls in Egypt. You wore on your great toe rings bearing the device of the sacred Scarabæus, and you supported one of the lightest bodies that lazy foot could sustain."

The foot replied in a pouting and chagrined tone:

"You know well that I do not belong to myself any longer. I have been bought and paid for. The old merchant knew what he was about. He bore you a grudge for having refused to espouse him. This is an ill turn which he has done you. The Arab who violated your royal coffin in the subterranean pits of the necropolis of Thebes was sent thither by him. He desired to prevent you from being present at the reunion of the shadowy nations in the cities below. Have you five pieces of gold for my ransom?"

"Alas, no! My jewels, my rings, my purses of gold and silver were all stolen from me," answered the Princess Hermonthis, with a sob.

"Princess," I then exclaimed, "I never retained anybody's foot unjustly. Even though you have not got the five louis which it cost me, I present it to you gladly. I should feel unutterably wretched to think that I were the cause of so amiable a person as the Princess Hermonthis being lame."

I delivered this discourse in a royally gallant, troubadour tone which must have astonished the beautiful Egyptian girl.

She turned a look of deepest gratitude upon me, and her eyes shone with bluish gleams of light.

She took her foot, which surrendered itself willingly this time, like a woman about to put on her little shoe, and adjusted it to her leg with much skill.

This operation over, she took a few steps about the room, as though to assure herself that she was really no longer lame.

"Ah, how pleased my father will be! He who was so unhappy because of my mutilation, and who from the moment of my birth set a whole nation at work to hollow me out a tomb so deep that he might preserve me intact until that last day, when souls must be weighed in the balance of Amenthi! Come with me to my father. He will receive you kindly, for you have given me back my foot."

I thought this proposition natural enough. I arrayed myself in a dressing-gown of large-flowered pattern, which lent me a very Pharaonic aspect, hurriedly put on a pair of Turkish slippers, and informed the Princess Hermonthis that I was ready to follow her.

Before starting, Hermonthis took from her neck the little idol of green paste, and laid it on the scattered sheets of paper which covered the table.

"It is only fair," she observed, smilingly, "that I should replace your paper-weight."

She gave me her hand, which felt soft and cold, like the skin of a serpent, and we departed.

We passed for some time with the velocity of an arrow through a fluid and grayish expanse, in which half-formed silhouettes flitted swiftly by us, to right and left.

For an instant we saw only sky and sea.

A few moments later obelisks commenced to tower in the distance; pylons and vast flights of steps guarded by sphinxes became clearly outlined against the horizon.

We had reached our destination.

The princess conducted me to a mountain of rose-coloured granite, in the face of which appeared an opening so narrow and low that it would have been difficult to distinguish it from the fissures in the rock, had not its location been marked by two stelæ wrought with sculptures.

Hermonthis kindled a torch and led the way before me.

We traversed corridors hewn through the living rock. These walls covered with hieroglyphics and paintings of allegorical processions, might well have occupied thousands of arms for thousands of years in their formation. These corridors of interminable length opened into square chambers, in the midst of which pits had been contrived, through which we descended by cramp-irons or spiral stairways. These pits again conducted us into other chambers, opening into other corridors, likewise decorated with painted sparrow-hawks, serpents coiled in circles, the symbols of the *tau* and *pedum*—prodigious works of art which no living eye can ever examine—interminable legends of granite which only the dead have time to read through all eternity.

At last we found ourselves in a hall so vast, so enormous, so immeasurable, that the eye could not reach its limits. Files of monstrous columns stretched far out of sight on every side, between which twinkled livid stars of yellowish flame; points of light which revealed further depths incalculable in the darkness beyond.

The Princess Hermonthis still held my hand, and graciously saluted the mummies of her acquaintance.

My eyes became accustomed to the dim twilight, and objects became discernible.

I beheld the kings of the subterranean races seated upon thrones—grand old men, though dry, withered, wrinkled like parchment, and blackened with naphtha and bitumen—all wearing *pshents* of gold, and breast-plates and gorgets glittering with precious stones, their eyes immovable fixed like eyes of sphinxes, and their long beards whitened by the snow of centuries. Behind them stood their peoples, in the stiff and constrained posture enjoined by Egyptian art, all eternally preserving the attitude prescribed by the hieratic code. Behind these nations, the cats, ibixes, and crocodiles comtemporary with them—rendered monstrous of aspect by their swathing bands—mewed, flapped their wings, or extended their jaws in a saurian giggle.

All the Pharaohs were there—Cheops, Chephrenes, Psammetichus, Sesostris, Amenotaph—all the dark rulers of the pyramids and syrinxes. On yet higher thrones sat Chronos and Xixouthros, who was contemporary with the deluge. and Tubal Cain, who reigned before it.

The beard of King Xixouthros had grown seven times around the granite table, upon which he leaned, lost in deep reverie, and buried in dreams.

Farther back, through a dusty cloud, I beheld dimly the seventy-two preadamite kings, with their seventy-two peoples, forever passed away.

After permitting me to gaze upon this bewildering spectacle a few moments, the Princess Hermonthis presented me to her father Pharaoh, who favoured me with a most gracious nod.

"I have found my foot again! I have found my foot!" cried the princess, clapping her little hands together with every sign of frantic joy. "It was this gentleman who restored it to me."

The races of Kemi, the races of Nahasi—all the black, bronzed, and copper-coloured nations repeated in chorus:

"The Princess Hermonthis has found her foot again!"

Even Xixouthros himself was visibly affected.

He raised his heavy eyelids, stroked his moustache with his fingers, and turned upon me a glance weighty with centuries.

"By Oms, the dog of Hell, and Tmei, daughter of the Sun and of Truth, this is a brave and worthy lad!" exclaimed Pharaoh, pointing to me with his sceptre, which was terminated with a lotus-flower.

"What recompense do you desire?"

Filled with that daring inspired by dreams in which nothing seems impossible, I asked him for the hand of the Princess Hermonthis. The hand seemed to me a very proper antithetic recompense for the foot.

Pharaoh opened wide his great eyes of glass in astonishment at my witty request.

"What country do you come from, what is your age?"

"I am a Frenchman, and I am twenty-seven years old, venerable Pharaoh."

"Twenty-seven years old, and he wishes to espouse the Princess Hermonthis who is thirty centuries old!" cried out at once all the Thrones and all the Circles of Nations.

Only Hermonthis herself did not seem to think my request unreasonable.

"If you were even only two thousand years old," replied the ancient king, "I would willingly give you the princess, but the disproportion is too great; and, besides, we must give our daughters husbands who will last well. You do not know how to preserve yourselves any longer. Even those who died only fifteen centuries ago are already no more than a handful of dust. Behold, my flesh is solid as basalt, my bones are bones of steel!

"I will be present on the last day of the world with the same body and the same features which I had during my lifetime. My daughter Hermonthis will last longer than a statue of bronze.

"Then the last particles of your dust will have been scattered abroad by the winds, and even Isis herself, who was able to find the atoms of Osiris, would scarce be able to recompense your being.

"See how vigorous I yet remain, and how mighty is my grasp," he added, shaking my hand in the English fashion with a strength that buried my rings in the flesh of my fingers.

He squeezed me so hard that I awoke, and found my friend Alfred shaking me by the arm to make me get up.

"Oh, you everlasting sleeper! Must I have you carried out into the middle of the street, and fire-works exploded in your ears? It is afternoon. Don't you recollect your promise to take me with you to see M. Aguado's Spanish pictures?"

"God! I forgot all, all about it," I answered, dressing myself hurriedly. "We will go there at once. I have the permit lying there on my desk."

I started to find it, but fancy my astonishment when I beheld, instead of the mummy's foot I had purchased the evening before, the little green paste idol left in its place by the Princess Hermonthis!

* * *

Avatar

Chapter I

OCTAVE DE SAVILLE

No one could understand the malady which was slowly undermining Octave de Saville. He was not confined to his bed; his ordinary existence was unchanged; no complaint fell from his lips; and yet it was none the less evident that he was fading away. Questioned by the physicians whom the solicitations of his friends and relations forced him to consult, he could mention no definite suffering, nor could science discover an alarming symptom: the auscultation of the chest gave out a favorable sound, and the ear applied to the heart detected scarcely an irregular pulsation; he had neither cough nor fever, but life ebbed from him through one of those invisible rents of which, Terence says, man is full.

Sometimes a strange faintness made him white as marble, for a few moments he appeared lifeless, then the pendulum, no longer stopped by the mysterious finger which had held it, resumed its sway, and Octave awakened as from a dream.

He had been sent to a water-cure, but the thermal nymphs proved powerless to help him, and a journey to Naples produced no better result. The radiant sun, of which he had heard so much, was to him as black as Albert Dürer has engraved it; the bat with Melancholia written on its wing beat the dazzling sky with its dusky web, and flew between him and the light; on the quay of Mergellina, where the half-clad lazzaroni sun themselves till their skins take on the hue of bronze, he had felt chilled to the heart. So returning to his small apartment in the Rue Saint-Lazare, he had apparently resumed his former habits.

This apartment was for a bachelor most comfortably furnished. But as in time an interior becomes impressed with the look and even the very thought of its inhabitant, Octave's home had little by little grown dull and mournful; the damask curtains had faded and admitted but a gray light; the large bunches of flowers were withering on the dingy white of the carpet; the gilt frames of a few choice water-colors and sketches had slowly reddened under a relentless dust; a discouraged fire smoked and died out under its own ashes; the antique buhl clock, inlaid with brass and tortoise shell, withheld the noise of its ticktack, and the voice of the dreary hours spoke low as one does in a sick-room; the doors closed silently, and the footfalls of rare visitors died away on the thick carpet; laughter ceased on penetrating these cold, sombre rooms, wherein modern luxury was omnipresent. Octave's servant, Jean, a duster under his arm, a tray in his hand, glided about like a shadow, for, unconsciously affected by the surrounding gloom, he had ended by losing his natural loquacity. Trophies, such as boxing gloves, masks, and foils, hung on the walls, but it was easy to see that they had long been untouched; books were tossed carelessly about, as if Octave had tried to lull some fixed idea by mechanical reading. An unfinished letter, yellowed with age, seemed to have been waiting its conclusion for months, and spread itself out on the table in silent reproach. Though inhabited, the apartment appeared deserted. Life was absent, and on entering one encountered the chill which issues from a tomb. In this lugubrious dwelling, where no woman ever set her foot, Octave was more at his ease than elsewhere; the silence, the sadness, and the neglect suited him; the joyous tumult of life disgusted him, though he made frequent efforts to join in it; but as he returned from the masquerades, the balls, or the suppers to which his friends dragged him, gloomier than before, he struggled no longer against his mysterious pain, and let the days slip by with the indifference of a man who expects nothing from the morrow. As he had lost faith in the future he made no plans, and having tacitly sent in his resignation to life, he was awaiting its acceptance. Nevertheless, if you imagined him thin of face, with an earthy complexion, attenuated limbs, and a wasted appearance, you would be much mistaken; a dark bruise under the eyelids, an orange shade around the orbits, a hollowing of the temples veined with blue, were alone observable. Yet his eyes were soulless, without trace of will, hope, or desire. This lifeless gaze in such a young face formed a strange contrast, and produced a more painful effect than the emaciated features and fevered expression of the ordinary invalid. Before his health was affected in this way Octave had been called a good-looking fellow, he was so still; thick, wavy black hair clustered in silky, lustrous masses at his temples; his eyes were large, velvety, and deeply blue, fringed with curved lashes, and at times luminous with a liquid fire; in repose, and when unanimated by passion, they had the serene look which the eyes of Orientals wear when, after smoking their nargileh, they take their *kief* at the café doors of Smyrna or Constantinople. His skin, always pale, had that southern tint of olive white which is most effective by gaslight; his hand was slender and delicate; his foot narrow and arched. He dressed well, without being in advance of the fashion or behind it, and knew perfectly how to set off his natural attractions to their best advantage. Though without the pretentions of an exquisite or a sportsman, had he been put up at the Jockey Club he would not have been blackballed.

How was it, then, that a man, young, handsome, rich, with every incentive to happiness, should be thus miserably consuming himself? The reader will imagine that Octave was blasé, that the novels of the day had filled his brain with morbid ideas, that he had no beliefs, that of his youth and fortune squandered in dissipation nothing remained to him but debts. All these suppositions would be erroneous. Octave had seen too little of dissipation to be tired of it: neither splenetic, romantic, atheistic, nor libertine, his life had been that of the average young man, a commingling of study and relaxation. In the morning, lectures at the Sorbonne claimed his attention, and in the evening, he might be seen stationed on the staircase of the Opéra watching the tide of beauty disperse. He was not known to take interest in either actress or duchess, and he spent his income without encroaching on the principal,—his lawyer respected him! In brief, he was of an equable temperament, incapable of jumping off a precipice, or setting a river on fire. The cause of his condition, which baffled the skill of the entire faculty, was so incredible in nineteenth century Paris that we must leave its narration to our hero.

As the ordinary scientists could make nothing of this strange illness (at the amphitheatres of anatomy a soul has yet to be dissected), an eccentric physician recently returned from India, and reputed to effect marvelous cures, was consulted as a last resource.

Octave, foreseeing a superior discernment capable of penetrating his secret, seemed to dread the doctor's visit, and it was only after repeated entreaties from his mother that he consented to receive M. Balthazar Cherbonneau. When the physician entered, Octave was stretched on a sofa; his head was propped up by a cushion, another supported his elbow, and a third covered his feet: wrapped in the soft and supple folds of a Turkish gown, he was reading, or rather holding, a book, for his eyes, though fixed on a page, saw nothing. His face was colorless, but, as has been hinted, showed no marked alteration. A superficial examination would not have disclosed dangerous syptoms in this young invalid, on whose table, instead of the pills, vials, potions, and other drugs usual in such cases, stood a box of cigars. Though slightly drawn, his clear-cut features had lost little of their natural charm, and but for his extreme debility and the irremediable despondency of his eye Octave would have appeared in a normal state of health.

In spite of his apathy Octave was struck by the physician's fantastic appearance. M. Balthazar Cherbonneau seemed as though he had escaped from one of Hoffman's Tales, and was wandering about astounded at the reality of his own grotesqueness. His sunburnt face was overhung by an enormous skull, which loss of hair made appear even larger than it really was. The bald cranium, polished as ivory, had remained white, while the face, exposed to the rays of the sun, had taken on the color of old oak or a smoky portrait. Its cavities and projecting bones were thrown in such bold relief that their slight covering of wrinkled flesh resembled damp parchment stretched on a death's head. The infrequent gray hairs which still lingered on the back of the head were gathered in three thin locks—two drawn up over the ears, and the third, starting from the nape of the neck and ending abruptly at the beginning of the forehead, crowned this nut-cracker countenance, and evoked unconscious regrets for the ancient peruque or the modern wig. But the most extraordinary thing about him was his eyes. His face, wrinkled with age, calcinated by incandescent skies, worn with vigils, marked in lines more closely pressed than the pages of a book, with the wearisome fatigues of life and of study, was illuminated by two orbs of turquoise blue, inconceivably limpid, fresh, and youthful. Sunken in sombre sockets, whose concentric membranes and pink edges vaguely recalled the dilating and contracting pupils of an owl, they gleamed like two blue stars, and made one suspect that, aided by some witchery of the Brahmans, the physician had stolen the eyes of a child, and transplanted them to his own cadaverous visage. Octave's eyes were those of an octogenarian, but Cherbonneau's blazed with the fire of youth. He was dressed in the physician's ordinary garb, a suit of black with silk waistcoat of the same color, while his shirt-front was ornamented with a large diamond, the present of some rajah or nabob. But, as if suspended from a peg, his clothes hung on him in perpendicular folds, broken, when he was seated, into sharp angles by his limbs. India's devouring sun could hardly have been the only cause of the phenomenal emaciation which he exhibited. It may be that in view of some initiation he had undergone the prolonged fasts of the fakirs, and had been extended by the yogis between four glowing braziers on the skin of a gazelle. His attenuation, however, was not the outcome of debility. His fleshless knuckles moved noiselessly, as were they held together by strong ligaments stretched on the hands like the strings of a violin.

With a stiff movement of the elbows which resembled the folding of a yard-measure, the physician seated himself in the chair by the sofa to which Octave motioned him, betraying, as he did so, an inveterate habit of squatting on a mat. So placed, M. Cherbonneau's back was turned to the light which fell directly on the face of his patient, a situation most favorable to examination, and one usually chosen by observers more desirous of seeing than of being seen. Though the physician's face was hidden in shadow, and the top of his cranium, round and polished as a gigantic ostrich-egg, alone caught a ray of light, Octave discerned the scintillation of his singular blue pupils, which appeared endowed with the glimmer peculiar to phosphorescent bodies, and emitted a clear, sharp beam which penetrated the invalid's chest with the hot, pricking sensation which an emetic causes.

"Well, sir," said the physician after a moment's silence, during which he seemed to sum up the symptoms noted in his rapid inspection, "I see already that yours is not a case of everyday pathology. You have none of the well-known signs of catalogued maladies which the physician cures or aggravates; and I shall not ask you for paper, or write from the codex a soothing prescription with a hieroglyphical signature for a tail-piece, or trouble your servant to go to the corner drug-shop." Octave smiled faintly as if to thank M. Cherbonneau for sparing him useless and disagreeable remedies.

"But," resumed the physician, "do not rejoice too quickly; because you have neither heart-disease, consumption, spinal complaint, softening of the brain, typhoid or nervous fever, it does not follow that you are in good health. Give me your hand."

Thinking M. Cherbonneau wished to count his pulse, and expecting to see him take out his watch for that purpose, Octave drew back the sleeve of his dressing-gown, and baring his wrist extended it mechanically. Into his yellow paw, of which the bony fingers resembled the claws of a crab, M. Cherbonneau took the young man's moist, veined hand, but instead of feeling with his thumb for that uneven pulsation which indicates that the machinery of man is out of order, he pressed and kneaded it as if to put himself in magnetic communication with his subject.

Though a skeptic in medicine, Octave could not restrain a sort of anxious emotion. The blood receded from his temples, and it seemed to him as if the physician's pressure was subtracting his very soul.

"My dear sir," M. Cherbonneau said, as he dropped Octave's hand, "your condition is far graver than you think; the old-fashioned treatments that are in vogue in Europe cannot aid you in the least. You have lost the will to live; insensibly, your soul is slipping from your body; yet there is no trace of hypochondria, lymphomania, nor yet of melancholy and suicidal preoccupation. No! There is nothing of that. Strange as it may appear, you might, did I not prevent you, succumb suddenly, without a single noticeable rupture internal or external. It is high time that I was summoned, for your spirit holds to your body merely by a thread; we will make a good strong knot of it, however." And therewith the doctor rubbed his hands blithesomely together, and smiled in a manner that sent the wrinkles eddying through the thousand lines of his weather-worn face.

"Monsieur Cherbonneau," Octave answered, "I do not know whether you will succeed, and as to that I care very little; but I must admit that you have gauged the cause of my mysterious affliction in the exactest and most penetrating manner. I feel as though I had become permeable, as though I were losing my ego as water runs through a sieve. I am melting away into the universal essence, and it is with difficulty that I distinguish my own identity from the surroundings into which it is being fused. Life, of which, as well as may be, I perform the daily pantomime to avoid grieving my relatives and friends, seems so far from me that there are moments when I feel as if I had already left this mortal sphere. Actuated by habitual motives whose mechanical impulse still lingers, I come and go, but without participating in my own actions. At the usual hours I seat myself at table, and appear to eat and drink; but the most highly seasoned dishes and the strongest wines have no flavor to me. The sunshine is pale as moonlight, and candle-flames are dark. I shiver in mid-summer. Often an intense silence oppresses me, much as though my heart had ceased beating, and the wheelwork was clogged by some unknown cause. If the dead are sentient, my condition must resemble theirs."

"You have," replied the physician, "a chronic inability to live, an entirely moral disease, and one more frequent than is supposed. Thought is a force which can kill as surely as electricity or prussic acid, though the signs of its ravages cannot be grasped by the means of such analysis as is at the disposal of vulgar science. What sorrow has set its fangs in your heart? From what secretly ambitious height have you fallen crushed and broken? On what despair do you muse in your immobility? Is it the thirst for power which torments you? Have you voluntarily renounced an aim placed too high for human attainment? You are very young for that. May it be that a woman has betrayed you?"

"No, doctor," continued Octave; "I have not even enjoyed that happiness."

"And yet," continued M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, "in your dull eyes, in the listless attitude of your body, in the lifeless tones of your voice, I read, as plainly as if it were stamped in gold letters on a morocco binding, the title of one of Shakespeare's plays."

"And what is this play which I unconsciously translate?" asked Octave, whose curiosity was aroused in spite of himself.

"Love's Labor's Lost," continued the doctor, with a purity of accent which betrayed a long residence in the English colonies of India.

Octave did not answer; a slight blush reddened his cheeks, and to cover his embarrassment he toyed with the tassel of his girdle. The physician crossed one leg over the other, producing the effect of the cross-bones carved on tombs, and clasped his foot in his hand in Oriental fashion. His blue eyes gazed into Octave's with a look at once soft and imperious.

"Come, come," said M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, "confide in me; souls are my specialty; you are my patient; and, like the Catholic priest to the penitent, I ask for a complete confession, and you can make it without kneeling."

"What good would it do? Supposing that you have divined correctly, the telling of my affliction would not relieve it. My sorrow is dumb. No earthly power, not even yours, can cure me."

"Perhaps," said the physician, settling himself more comfortably in his arm-chair, as if preparing to listen to a long confidence.

"I do not wish you," continued Octave, "to accuse me of a puerile obstinacy, nor to give you by my silence a pretext for washing your hands of my death; so, since you ask it, I will tell you my history: you have guessed the main point, I need not spare the details. Do not expect anything singular or romantic. It is a very simple adventure, very commonplace, very threadbare; but, as sings Henri Heine, whoso meets it finds it ever new, though the heart be broken every time. Really, I am ashamed to relate such an ordinary tale to a man who has lived in the most fabulous and chimerical countries."

"Do not fear," said the physician, smiling, "it is only the commonplace which can be extraordinary to me."

"Well, doctor, love is killing me."

CHAPTER II

MUTE APOSTROPHES

"TOWARDS the end of the summer of 184– I found myself in Florence, at the best season for seeing that city. I had time, money, excellent letters of introduction, and I was a good-humored youth, only too ready to be amused. I installed myself on the Lung'-Arno, hired a trap, and drifted into that easy Florentine life which is so full of charm to the stranger. In the morning I visited some church, palace, or gallery, quite leisurely, without hurry, as I did not wish to give myself that indigestion of master-pieces which disgusts the too hasty tourist with art. One morning I examined the bronze doors of the Baptistery; another, the Perseus of Benvenuto under the Loggia dei Lanzi, the portrait of Fornarina, or Canova's

Venus in the Pitti Palace, but never more than one object at a time. Then I breakfasted off a cup of iced coffee at the Café Doney, smoked a cigar or two, glanced at the papers, and, my buttonhole decorated, willingly or not, by one of the pretty flower-girls who in their huge straw hats stand before the café, I returned home for a siesta. At three o'clock the carriage came to take me to the Cascine. The Cascine is to Florence what the Bois de Boulogne is to Paris, with this difference, that every one is acquainted, and the square is an open-air drawing-room, where chairs are replaced by the half circle of carriages. The women, in full dress, recline on the cushions, and receive the visits of lovers, friends, exquisites, and attachés, who pose, hat in hand, at the carriage-steps. But you know all this as well as I. There plans for the evening are made, meetings are arranged, answers are given, invitations accepted; it is like a Pleasure Exchange open from three to five in the shade of beautiful trees, under the world's fairest sky. It is incumbent on every one of the least consequence to be seen there daily, and I was careful not to miss it. In the evening I made a visit or two, or if the prima donna was an attraction I went to the Pergola.

"In this way I spent one of the happiest months of my life; but my good fortune was not destined to last. One day a magnificent open carriage made its first appearance at the Cascine. It was one of Laurenzi's *chef-d'œuvres,* and a superb example of Viennese manufacture; glittering with varnish, and blazoned with an almost royal coat of arms, there was harnessed to it as handsome a pair of horses as ever paraded in Hyde Park, or drew up before St. James' Palace during a drawing-room; added to this, it was driven à la Daumont in the correctest style by a youthful postilion in green livery and white knee-breeches. The brass on the harness, the boxes of the wheels, the door-handles, all shone like gold and sparkled in the sun; every eye followed this splendid equipage, which, after making a curve as regular as if traced by a compass, drew up near the other vehicles. The carriage, you may be sure, was not empty; but in the speed with which it passed nothing had been distinguished but the tip of a slipper extended on a cushion, a large fold of shawl, and the disk of a parasol fringed with white silk. The parasol was now closed, and a woman of incomparable beauty was revealed. Being on horseback, I was able to approach near enough to lose no detail of this poem in flesh. The fair stranger, with the assurance of a perfect blonde, wore a gown of that silvery Nile green which makes any woman whose skin is not irreproachable look as dark as that of a mole. A beautiful shawl of white crêpe de chine, thick with embroidery of the same color, enveloped her like a Phidian statue in its clinging, rumpled drapery, while a bonnet of fine Florentine straw, covered with forget-me-nots and delicate aquatic plants of slender glaucous leaves, formed an aureole about her face. Her only ornament was a gold lizard studded with turquoises, which encircled the arm that held the parasol.

"Forgive me, doctor, this fashion-plate description. To a lover these trivialities are of enormous importance. Thick, rippling golden hair lay like undulations of light in luxuriant waves upon her brow, which itself was smooth and white as the new-fallen snow on the highest Alpine peak; long lashes, fine as the threads of gold radiating from the angel heads in the miniatures of the Middle Ages, veiled her eyes, whose pupils had the bluish-green light of a sun-pierced glacier. Her divinely modeled mouth glowed with the carmine of a sea-shell, and her cheeks resembled white roses flushed by the wooing of the nightingale or the kiss of the butterfly; no mortal brush could copy the suavity, the fairness, and the immaterial transparency of this complexion, of which the tints seemed hardly due to the blood which colors our coarser skins; the first blush of morn on the ridge of the Sierra Nevada, the rose-tipped petals of a camellia, Parian marble seen through a pink gauze veil, can alone give of it a vague idea. The creamy iridescence of the neck, visible between the shawl and the bonnet strings, gleamed with opalescent reflections. It was the Venetian coloring, and not the features, that arrested attention, though the latter were as clear-cut and exquisite as the profile of an antique cameo. When I saw her, I forgot my past loves, as Romeo at sight of Juliet forgot Rosalind. The pages of my heart became blank: every name, every memory, was obliterated. I wondered how the commonplace love affairs which few young men escape had ever had any attraction for me, and I reproached myself for them as if they had been culpable infidelities. A new life dated for me from this fatal encounter.

"Presently the carriage left the Cascine and took the road back to town. When the dazzling vision had vanished I brought my horse alongside that of an amiable young Russian, a great lover of watering places, a man who had frequented all the cosmopolitan drawing-rooms of Europe, and who was thoroughly conversant with the traveling contingent of high life; I turned the conversation on the fair stranger, and learned that she was known as the Countess Prascovie Labinska, a Lithuanian of illustrious birth and great fortune, whose husband had been fighting for two years in the Caucasian war.

"It is needless to tell you what diplomacy I used to be received by the countess, who, in view of her husband's absence, was necessarily circumspect in her receptions. At last, however, I was admitted; two dowager princesses and four aged baronesses answering for me on their ancient virtue.

"The Countess Labinska had taken, a mile or so from Florence, a magnificent villa, a former belonging of the Salviati family, and in a short space of time had filled the mediæval manor with every modern comfort without in the least disturbing its severe beauty and serious elegance. Heavy blazoned portières were in fit keeping with the vaulted arches from which they fell; the easy-chairs and other furniture of quaint and curious shapes harmonized with the sombre wainscoted walls and the frescoes dulled and faded to the hues of old tapestry; and through it all there was not a note that jarred. The present did not clash with the past. The countess was so naturally the châtelaine that the old palace seemed built as her appropriate setting.

"Fascinated as I had been by the countess' radiant beauty, at the end of several visits I was yet more charmed by her brilliant and subtle mind. When the conversation was of interest, her soul shone luminous in her eyes, the pallor of her cheek glowed with an inner flame as does a lamp of alabaster: the phosphorescent scintillations, the quivering of light of which Dante speaks in his description of the splendors of Paradise, were illustrated in her appearance, as who should say an angel thrown in bright relief against a sun. I stood bewildered, stupefied, and ecstatic. Lost in contemplation of her beauty, enchanted by the celestial tones of her voice, which made of every sentence ineffable music, I stammered, when obliged to speak, a few incoherent words, which must have given her a poor idea of my intelligence, and sometimes at certain phrases which denoted on my part either great embarrassment or incurable imbecility an imperceptible smile of friendly irony danced like a rose-colored ripple over her charming lips.

"Still I had not told my love, for in her presence I was without thought, strength, or courage; only my heart throbbed as though it would break its bonds and fling itself at the knees of its sovereign. Twenty times I had determined to explain myself, but an insurmountable timidity restrained me; the least look of coldness or reserve from the countess threw me into a deathly trance comparable to that of the condemned who, bowed on the block, await the stroke of the axe that is to sever the head from the body. I was strangled by nervous contractions; I was bathed in any icy perspiration. I reddened, I grew pale, and without having dared to speak I came away, finding the door with difficulty, and staggering down the steps of the house like a drunkard. Once outside I came to my senses, and threw to the wind the most inflamed dithyrambs. I addressed to my absent idol a thousand declarations of an irresistible eloquence. In these mute apostrophes I equaled Love's greatest poets. The vertiginous perfume of the Orient, the poetry of Solomon's Song of Songs, hallucinated with hashish, the platonic subtleties and ethereal delicacy of Petrarch's sonnets, the nervous and delirious sensibility of Heine's 'Intermezzo,' could not compare with the exhaustless effusions of the soul in which my life wasted itself away. At the end of each monologue it seemed to me that the countess, vanquished, at last, must descend from the heavens to my heart, and frequently I clasped my arms to my bosom, thinking to enfold her in them.

"I was so completely possessed that I spent hours in murmuring like a litany of love the two words,—Prascovie Labinska; and in these syllables, dropped slowly like pearls, or repeated with the feverish volubility of a devotee exalted by prayer, I found an indefinable charm. Then again, I wrote the adored name on the finest parchment, illuminating it like a mediæval manuscript with flowered designs and traceries of azure and gold. In this work of pathetic minuteness and puerile perfection I passed the long hours which separated my visits to the countess. I could not read or otherwise occupy myself. Nothing but Prascovie interested me, and even my letters from France lay unopened. I made repeated efforts to overcome this condition; I tried to recall the axioms of seduction accepted by young men, the stratagems used by the Valmonts of the Café de Paris and the Don Juans of the Jockey Club; but to execute them my heart failed me, and I regretted that I had not, like Stendhal's Julien Sorel, a package of progressive epistles which I could copy and send to the countess. Unfortunately, I could only surrender myself, without the power to ask a return, without even a hope in the future; indeed, in my most audacious dreams I hardly dared touch with my lips the tips of Prascovie's rosy fingers. A fifteenth-century novice prostrate on the steps of an altar, a chevalier kneeling in his rigid armor, could not have had a more self-annihilating adoration for the Virgin."

M. Balthazar Cherbonneau had listened to Octave with profound attention; for to him the young man's story was not merely a tale of romance, and he murmured, during a pause in the narrative, as if to himself, "Yes, that is certainly a diagnostic of love, a curious malady which I have encountered but once,—at Chandernagore,—in a young Pariah in love with a Brahman; it killed her, poor girl, but she was a savage; you, M. Octave, you are a civilized being, and we will cure you." This parenthesis concluded, he motioned M. de Saville to continue; and, doubling back his leg to the thigh, like the articulated limb of a grasshopper, so as to support his chin on his knee, he settled himself in this position, impossible to any one else, but which to him appeared very restful.

"I do not want to bore you with the details of my secret martyrdom," resumed Octave; "I will hasten to a decisive scene. One day, unable to restrain my imperious desire to see the countess, I went to her before the hour at which she was accustomed to receive. The weather was heavy and overcast. Mme. Labinska was not in the salon. She was seated under a portico, which was supported by graceful columns, and opened on a terrace, from which one descended to the garden; she had had her piano, a wicker lounge, and a few chairs brought out, and jardinières filled with splendid flowers (nowhere are they so fresh and odorous as in Florence) stood between the columns, and impregnated with their perfume the infrequent breezes which came from the Apennines. In front, through the openings of the arcades, one could see the well-pruned yew and box trees, peopled with mythological statues in the labored style of Baccia Bandinelli or of Ammanato, and here and there a tall centenary cypress. In the dim distance rose the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore, and the square belfry of Palazza Vecchio jutted above the silhouette of the town.

"The countess was alone, and reclining on her lounge; never had I thought her so beautiful; in indolent languor she lay like a water nymph, billowed in the foamy whiteness of an ample India-muslin gown that was bordered with a frothy trimming which resembled the silvery edge of a wave, and clasped at the throat by an exquisitely chased Khorassan brooch. In brief, her costume was as airy as the drapery which floats about the figure of Victory. Her arms, fairer than the alabaster in which Florentine sculptors copy antique statues, issued from wide sleeves open to the shoulder like pistils from a flower chalice; a broad black sash knotted at the waist with falling ends contrasted sharply with all this whiteness; but the melancholy effect which these shades ascribed to mourning might have given was enlivened by the point of a tiny Circassian slipper of blue morocco figured with yellow arabesques, which peeped from beneath her skirt.

"The countess' blonde hair, slightly raised as if by a passing zephyr, revealed her smooth forehead and transparent temples, and formed a nimbus, through which the light glittered in a shower of gold.

"On a chair near by, a large hat of rice straw, trimmed with long black ribbons, similar to those on her dress, fluttered in the breeze, and by it was a pair of unworn gloves of Swedish kid. On my arrival Prascovie closed the book she was reading,—the poems of Mickiewicz,—and gave me a kindly nod; she was alone, a circumstance as uncommon as it was favorable. I seated myself opposite her on the chair she designated, and for some minutes one of those silences fell upon us which are so painful if prolonged. None of the commonplaces of conversation came to my aid; my thoughts were confused, waves of flame rose from my heart to my eyes, and my passion cried, 'Do not lose this opportunity.'

"I do not know what I might have done if the countess, divining the cause of my emotion, had not partly risen, and extended her beautiful hand as though to close my mouth.

"'Not a word, Octave. You love me, I know, I feel, I believe it; nor does it anger me, for love is involuntary. Stricter women than I would be offended, but I pity you because I cannot return it, and it pains me to be the cause of your unhappiness. I regret that we should have met, and blame the whim which made me leave Venice for Florence. At first I hoped that my persistent coldness would weary and estrange you, but nothing rebuffs true love, of which I see all the signs in your eyes. Do not let my sympathy arouse in you either dreams or illusions; nor must you take it as an encouragement. An angel with diamond shield and flaming sword protects me more surely than religion, duty, or virtue against every seduction; and this angel is my love: I adore the Count Labinski. I have had the good fortune to make a love-match.'

"A flood of tears burst from my eyes at this frank, loyal, yet modest avowal, and I felt the spring of life break within me.

"Prascovie rose in extreme agitation, and, with a motion of gracious feminine pity, pressed her delicate handkerchief to my eyes.

"'There, do not weep,' she said; 'I forbid it. Try to divert your thoughts; imagine that I have forever disappeared, that I am dead; forget me. Travel, work, do good; mingle actively in the tide of life; console yourself with art or love' . . . At this I interrupted her with a gesture.

"'Do you think,' she asked, 'you would suffer less in continuing to see me? If so, come. I will always receive you. God says we must pardon our enemies; why, then, should we ill-treat those who love us? Nevertheless, absence seems to me a more certain remedy. In two years we can shake hands without danger—for you,' she added, attempting a smile.

"The next day I left Florence; but

neither study, travel, nor time has diminished my suffering. I am dying: do not prevent it, doctor!"

"Have you seen the countess since?" asked the physician, with an odd sparkle in his blue eyes.

"No," answered Octave, "but she is in Paris," and he extended a card on which was engraved:

The Countess Prascovie Labinska. And in a corner, *Thursday.*

CHAPTER III

COUNT LABINSKI

AMONG the infrequent passers who follow the Avenue Gabriel from the Turkish Embassy to the Elysée Bourbon, and prefer the silence, solitude, and fragrant calm of this avenue to the dusty whirl and noisy elegance of the Champs-Elysées, there are few who would not pause with mingled feelings of admirations and envy before a poetic and mysterious dwelling where for once felicity seemed to be lodged by wealth.

Who is there who has not halted at the railing of a park and gazed attentively through the green foliage at some white villa, and then passed on with heavy heart, as if the dream of his life lay hidden behind the walls? Then, again, other dwellings seen thus from the outside cause an indefinable melancholy. The gray gloom of desertion and despair has settled upon them and blighted the tops of the surrounding trees; the statues are moss-stained, the flowers droop, the water stagnates in the fountain; in spite of the rake, the paths are overrun with weeds, and if there are birds they are dumb.

The gardens on the Avenue Gabriel are separated from the sidewalk by a hedge, and extend in strips of varying size to the houses which face the Faubourg Saint-Honoré. The one alluded to ended at the street in an embankment supporting a wall of rocks chosen for the curious irregularity of their shape. The sides of this wall, being much higher than the centre, formed a rough, dark frame for the radiant landscape set between. The crevices of the rocks held soil enough to nourish the roots of rich plants and flowers, whose variegated verdure was thrown into relief against the sombre hue of the stone. No artist could have created a more effective foreground.

The walls that inclosed the sides of this miniature paradise disappeared under a curtain of climbing plants, of which the stalks, shoots, and tendrils formed a trellis of green. Thanks to this arrangement, the garden resembled an opening in a forest, rather than a narrow grass plot shut in the limits of civilization.

Just behind the rock-work stood several groups of slender trees, whose thick foliage contrasted picturesquely. Beyond them spread a plot of turf, without an uneven spear of grass. Finer, softer than the velvet of a queen's mantle, it was of that ideal green rarely obtained, except before the steps of a feudal English manor; a natural carpet on which the eye loves to rest, and the foot fears to crush; an emerald rug where, during the day, the pet gazelle frolics in the sun with the lace-frocked scion of an hundred earls, and where by moonlight a Titania of the West End glides hand in hand with an Oberon inscribed in the peerage. A path of sand, sifted through a sieve that no bit of shell or edge of flint should fret the aristocratic foot, circled like a yellow ribbon around this thick, smooth lawn, which, leveled by the roller, was moistened even in the dryest days of summer with the artificial rain of the sprinkler. At the end of the grass-plot blazed a bed of geraniums, a display of flowery fireworks, whose scarlet stars flamed against a dark mass of heath.

The charming façade of the house closed the perspective. Slim Ionic pillars, and a classical roof surmounted at each corner by graceful marble statues, gave it the appearance of a Greek temple transported by the fancy of a millionaire, and subdued, by a suggestion of art and poetry, all that might otherwise have seemed ostentatious luxury; between the pillars awnings slashed with crimson were usually lowered, shading and defining the windows which opened, at full length, like glass doors, under the portico.

When the capricious sky of Paris deigned to stretch a bit of blue behind this dainty palace it looked so lovely in its thicket of verdure that it might easily have been taken for the abode of a fairy queen, or for one of Baron's pictures enlarged.

Extending into the garden from each side of the house were two conservatories, whose crystal panes, set in gilt, sparkled in the sun, and gave to a world of the rarest exotic plants the illusion of their native air.

A matutinal poet strolling in the Avenue Gabriel at dawn would have heard the nightingale trilling the last notes of his nocturne, and seen the blackbird in his yellow slippers quite at home in the garden walks. At night, in the silence of the sleeping city, when the roll of carriages returning from the Opéra has ceased, the same poet might have dimly distinguished a white-robed form clinging to the arm of a young and handsome man, and he would certainly have returned to his solitary attic sad and depressed.

The reader, doubtless, divines that here lived the Countess Prascovie Labinski and her husband. Count Olaf Labinski had returned from the Caucasian war after a glorious campaign, in which, if he had not fought face to face with the mystical and intangible Schamyl, at least he had attacked the most devout and fanatic Mourides of the illustrious Sheik. He avoided bullets as only the brave can, by rushing to meet them, and the curved scimiters of the warlike barbarians had broken on his chest without so much as scratching him. Courage is a flawless cuirass. The Count Labinski possessed the mad valor of the Slav races, who love danger for its own sake, and to whom can be applied the refrain of an old Scandinavian song: "They kill, die, and laugh!"

The rapture with which husband and wife, to whom marriage was a passion sanctioned by God and man, were reunited could only be described by Thomas Moore in the style of the "Loves of the Angels"! To portray it, each drop of ink would have to be transformed to a drop of light, and each word evaporate on the paper with the flame and the perfume of a grain of incense. What picture is possible of souls melted in one like two dew-drops which, dissolving on a lily petal, meet, blend, absorb one another, and form but a single gem?

Happiness is so rare in this world

that man has not thought to invent words to depict it, while on the other hand the vocabulary of suffering, moral and physical, fills innumerable columns in the dictionaries of all languages.

Lovers, even in childhood, the hearts of Olaf and Prascovie had never throbbed to other names. In fact, knowing almost from the cradle that they were destined for each other, the rest of the world was but landscape to them. One might have said that they were the twin halves of Plato's Androgyne, which, seeking each other since the primeval divorce, were at last united and joined together. In short, they formed that duality in unity which is known as perfect harmony; and, side by side, they marched, or rather sped, through life with an equal impulse, sustained and impelled, as Dante has it, "like two doves beckoned by the same desire."

That nothing might disturb this felicity, a colossal fortune enveloped it in an atmosphere of gold. When this radiant couple appeared, Misery, consoled, shed its rags, and dried its tears; for Olaf and Prascovie had the noble egotism of happiness, and could not endure affliction amid their own delight.

Since polytheism has disappeared, and with it the young gods, the smiling genii, the celestial youths whose forms were absolute in perfection, harmonious in rhythm, and perfect in idealism, and since ancient Greece no longer chants the hymn to beauty in Parian strophes, man has cruelly abused his permission to be ill-favored. Although fashioned in God's image, he is but a poor likeness of him.

The Count Labinski, however, had not profited by this license. His face was an elongated oval; his nose was clearly and boldly cut; his mouth firmly outlined and accentuated by a pointed blonde mustache; his chin, cleft by a dimple, was ever raised; while his black eyes, through a striking and pleasing singularity, caused him to look like one of the warrior angels, St. Michael or Raphael, who, mailed in gold, combated the devil. In fact, he would have been too handsome were it not for the virile light which shone from the dark iris of his eyes, and the shade of bronze that the sun of Asia had spread over his features.

The count was of middle height, slight, graceful, nervous, concealing, beneath an apparent delicacy, muscles of steel. When for some embassy ball he donned a magnate's costume, that was embossed with gold, glittered with diamonds, and embroidered with pearls, he passed through the throng like a shining apparition, exciting the jealousy of the men and the admiration of the women, to whom, be it said, Prascovie rendered him indifferent. We need not add that the count was as intelligent as he was handsome; the good fairies had visited his cradle, and the evil witch who spoils everything was in a good humor that day.

It is easy to understand that with such a rival Octave de Saville stood a poor chance, and also, that he was sensible in allowing himself to expire quietly on the cushions of his sofa, and that, too, despite the hope with which the fantastic physician, Balthazar Cherbonneau attempted to revivify his heart. The only way was to forget Prascovie, and that was impossible. To see her was evidently useless. Octave felt that the countess' resolution would never weaken in its gentle implacability and compassionate coldness. He was afraid that in the presence of his innocent and beloved assassin his wounds might reopen and bleed, and he did not wish to accuse her.

Chapter IV

BOSOME OF THE INCREATE

Two years had passed since the day when the Countess Labinska had prevented Octave from making the declaration of love to which she had no right to listen. Awakened from his dream, Octave had taken his departure a prey to the blackest despair, and had not since communicated with her. The one word he would have wished to write was forbidden. Surprised at his silence, the countess' thoughts had frequently and sorrowfully turned to her unfortunate admirer: had he forgotten her? The simplicity of her nature made her hope that he had, without being able to believe that he had really done so, for the light of inextinguishable passion which blazed in Octave's eyes was not of a character to be misinterpreted. Love and the gods are recognized at first sight. The limpid azure of her content was slightly clouded by this knowledge, and it inspired her with the tender melancholy of the angels who, in heaven, have yet a thought for earth. Her gentle spirit suffered that she should be the cause of pain; but what can the golden star shining on high do for the obscure shepherd holding up his mortal arms. In mythological times it is true Diana descended in silvery rays upon the sleeping Endymion, but then Diana was not married to a Polish count.

The Countess Labinska, upon her arrival in Paris, had sent Octave the commonplace invitation which Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau was twirling abstractedly between his fingers. Though she had wished him to come to see her, yet when he failed to do so she said to herself with a feeling of involuntary joy, "He loves me still!" She was a woman of angelic purity, and chaste as the uppermost snow of the Himalayas; but God himself in the depth of the infinite has to distract him from the monotony of eternity only the pleasure of hearing the beating heart of some poor, perishable creature on a puny globe that is itself lost in the immensities of space. Prascovie was not sterner than God, and Count Olaf could not have censured this delicate voluptuousness of the soul.

"Your story, to which I have listened attentively," said the physician to Octave, "proves to me that all hope on your part would be chimerical. The countess will never share your love."

"You see, Monsieur Cherbonneau, that I was right in not trying to retain my ebbing life."

"I said," the physician continued, "that ordinary remedies were useless. But, in lands which the stupidity of civilization regards as barbarous there are occult powers, of which contemporary science is absolutely ignorant. In those lands primitive man in his first contact with the vivifying forces of nature acquired a knowledge which is believed to have since been lost, a knowledge which the migrating tribes, the founders of races, were unable to preserve. This knowledge, handed down from initiate to initiate in the dumb recesses of temples, was subsequently confided to hieroglyphics paneled across the walls of the Elloran crypt in sacred idioms, unintelligible to the vulgar. But on the summit of Meru,—the cradle of the Ganges, at the foot of the marble stairs of the holy city of Benares, in depths of the ruined pagodas of Ceylon, aged Brahmans are to be seen deciphering forgotten manuscripts, yogis, who, unconscious of the birds that nest in their hair, pass their lives in repeating the ineffable syllable Om, and fakirs whose shoulders still bear the cicatrices of the Juggernaut's iron stamp. These are the ultimate depositaries of the lost arcana, and it is they who, when they so deign, are able with their esoteric lore to produce the most marvelous effects.

"The materialism of Europe has not the faintest conception of the spirituality which the Hindus have reached: the protracted fasts, the self-absorption, the impossible attitudes maintained for years together, attenuate their bodies to such an extent that to see them crouched beneath a molten sun, between glowing braziers, their long nails buried in the palms of their hands, one might fancy they were Egyptian mummies withdrawn from their tombs, and bent double in apelike positions. Their mortal envelope is but a chrysalis, which the immortal butterfly, the soul, can abandon or resume at will. While their meagre form, inert and hideous, lies like a night moth surprised by the dawn, their untrammeled spirit rises on the wings of hallucination through incalculable distances to the spheres of the supernatural. They are visited by dreams and visions; from one ecstasy to another they follow the undulations that the ages make as they sink and subside in the oceans of eternity. To them the infinite delivers up its secrets; they assist at the creation of worlds, at the genesis and metamorphosis of gods; they recall the sciences that have been engulfed in plutonian and diluvian cataclysms, the unremembered relations of man and of nature. When in this condition they mumble words that no child of earth has lisped for æons; they intercept the primordial tongue, the Logos which made light spring from the archaic shadows. They are regarded as madmen; they are almost gods!"

This singular preamble aroused Octave's attention to the last degree. He was unable to understand what connection there could be between his love for the countess and the mummeries of the Hindus, and, in consequence, his eyes bristled with interrogation points. His state of mind was divined by the physician who, waving aside his questions with a gesture as who should say, Be patient, you will see in a moment that I am not digressing, continued as follows:—

"Outwearied of questioning, scalpel in hand, the dumb corpses in the amphitheatres, corpses that disclosed but death to me who sought life, I formed the project—and one, be it said, as audacious as that of Prometheus who scaled the heavens to rob them of fire,—I formed the project of intercepting and surprising the soul, of analyzing and dissecting it, if I may so express myself. I passed over the effect; I looked for the cause; and therewith conceived an immense disdain for the self-evident nothingness of materialism.

"To work over a fortuitous combination of evanescent molecules seemed to me worthy only of a vulgar empiric.

I attempted to undo with magnetism the bands that join mind and matter. In experiments that were certainly prodigious, but which failed to satisfy me, I surpassed Mesmer, Deslon, Maxwell, Puységur, and Deleuze: Catalepsy, somnambulism, clairvoyance, soul projection, in fact, all the effects which are incomprehensible to the masses, though simple enough to me, I produced at will. Nay, I did more; from the ecstasies of Cardan and St. Thomas of Aquinas I ascended to the self-abstraction of the Pythians; I penetrated the mysteries of the Greeks; the arcana of the Hebrews; I pierced the innermost wisdom of Trophonius and Æsculapius, and therewithal, I found in their now traditional miracles that by a gesture, a word, a glance, by mere volition or some other unknown agent, the soul would shrink or expand. One by one I repeated all the miracles of Apollonius of Tyana. Yet still my ambition was unfulfilled; the soul escaped me; I could feel it, hear it, act upon it, but between it and myself there was a veil of flesh that I could not draw aside. Did I do so, the soul had vanished. I was like the bird-catcher who holds a bird beneath a net which he dare not raise lest his winged prey shall mount the sky and escape him.

"I went, therefore, to India. In that land of archaic wisdom I hoped to find the solution of the riddle. I learned Sanskrit and Prakrit, the idioms of the erudite, and the language of the people. I enabled myself to converse with Pundits and Brahmans. I crossed the tiger-haunted jungles. I skirted the sacred lakes possessed of crocodiles. I forced my way through impenetrable forests, scattering the bats and monkeys before my path, and at times, in a byway made by savage beasts, I halted abruptly face to face with an elephant. And all this to reach the hut of some far-famed yogi, one in communication with the Mahatmas; and near him I would sit for days sharing his gazelle skin, and noting the vague incantations that fell from his black, cracked lips. In this manner I caught the all-powerful words, the evoking formulas, the syllables of the creating Logos.

"In the interior recesses of pagodas that no eye save that of the initiate has seen, but which the garb of a Brahman permitted me to penetrate, I studied the symbolic sculptures. I read many of the cosmological mysteries, many of the legends of lost civilizations. I discovered the meaning of the emblems that the hybrid gods, profuse as Indian vegetation, clutch in their multiple hands. I meditated over Brahma's circle, Vishnu's lotus, the cobra de capello of the blue god Siro. Ganesa unrolling her pachyderm trunk, and winking her small eyes fringed with long lashes, seemed to smile at my efforts and encourage my researches. Each one of these monstrous figures appeared to whisper in their language of stone: 'We are but forms; it is the Spirit that stirs.'

"A priest of the Temple of Tirunamalay, to whom I disclosed my intentions, told me of a yogi who dwelt in one of the grottoes of the isle of Elephanta, and who had reached the highest degree of sanctity. I found him propped against the wall of the cavern. Robed in sackcloth, his knees drawn up to his chin, his fingers clasped around his legs, he crouched there motionless. His upturned pupils left visible only the whites of his eyes; his drawn lips exposed his teeth; his skin clung to his cheek-bones; his hair, thrown back, hung in stiff locks like overhanging plants; his beard, divided in two floods, nearly touched the ground; and his nails curved inward like an eagle's claw.

"His skin, naturally brown, had been dried and darkened by the sun till it resembled basalt, and, thus, seated, he looked, both in form and color, like a Canopic vase. At first I thought him dead. His arms, that were anchylosed in a cataleptic immobility, I shook in vain; in his ear I shouted the most powerful of the sacramental words which were to reveal me to him as initiate, but he heeded them not, nor did his eyelids quiver. In my despair of arousing him I was about to leave him, when suddenly I heard a singular rustle; swift as a lightning flash a bluish spark passed before my eyes, hovered for a second on the half-open lips of the penitent, and disappeared.

"Brahma-Logum (such was the name of this holy personage) seemed to awake from a lethargy; he opened his eyes, gazed at me in a natural manner, and answered my question. 'Your wish is fulfilled,' he said; 'you have seen a soul. I have succeeded in freeing mine from my body whenever it so pleases me; it goes and returns like a luminous bee, perceptible only to the eyes of the adept. I have fasted, I have prayed, I have meditated so long, I have dominated the flesh so rigorously, that I have been able to loose the terrestrial bonds. Vishnu, the god of the tenfold incarnations, has revealed to me the mysterious syllable that guides the soul in its avatars. If, after making the consecrated gestures, I were to pronounce that word, your soul would fly away and animate whatever man or beast I might designate. I bequeath you this secret, which of the whole world I am now the sole possessor. I am glad you have come, for I long to disappear in the bosom of the Increate as does the drop of water that falls in the sea.' And therewith the penitent whispered in a voice as feeble as the last gasp of the moribund, but very distinctly, a few syllables which made a shudder, such as that which Job has mentioned, run down my back."

"Doctor," cried Octave, "what do you mean? I dare not fathom the awful profundities of your thought."

"I mean," M. Balthazar Cherbonneau tranquilly replied, "that I have not forgotten my friend Brahma-Logum's magic formula, and that the Countess Prascovie will be clever indeed if she recognizes the soul of Octave de Saville in the body of Olaf Labinski."

Chapter V

A PASSIONATE INVOCATION

Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau's reputation as physician and wonder-worker had begun to be noised through Paris. His eccentricities, affected or natural, had made him the fashion. But far from seeking to form what is called a practice, he rebuffed his patients by shutting the door in their faces, giving strange prescriptions, or ordering impossible regimens. The cases that he accepted were those that were hopeless; a vulgar consumption, a humdrum enterite, or a commonplace typhoid be disdainfully dismissed to the care of his brother practitioners. But on supreme occasions the cures he effected were simply inconceivable. Standing at the bedside, he made magic gestures over a glass of water, and bodies already stiff and cold, prepared even for the coffin, after imbibing a few drops of the liquid recovered the flexibility of life, the colors of health, and sitting up again gazed about them with eyes that had become accustomed to the shadows of the tomb. In consequence, he was known as the resurrectionist, the physician of the dead. But it was not always that he consented to use his powers, and he often refused enormous sums from wealthy invalids. To decide him to undertake a struggle with destruction, he must needs be touched by the grief of some mother imploring the restoration of her only child; by the despair of some lover whose beloved was at the door of death; or else it was necessary for him to consider the patient as one whose life was valuable to poetry, science, or the progress of humanity. In this way he saved a delicious baby that was being throttled by croup's iron fingers, a charming maiden in the last stages of consumption, a poet in delirium tremens, an inventor attacked by cerebral congestion, and whose discovery would otherwise have been buried with him.

Elsewhere he declined to intervene, alleging that nature should not be interfered with, that certain deaths were necessary, and that in preventing them there was a risk of disturbing something in the order that is universal. You can see, therefore, that M. Balthazar Cherbonneau was the most paradoxical of physicians, and that he had brought with him from India a complete outfit of vagaries. His fame as a magnetizer was, however, even greater than his fame as a physician. In the presence of a select company he had given a séance or two, of which the marvels that were related disturbed every preconceived idea of the possible and the impossible and surpassed the prodigies of Cagliostro.

Dr. Cherbonneau lived on the ground floor of an old mansion in the Rue du Regard. The apartment which he occupied was strung out in the manner peculiar to former times. The high windows opened on a garden that was planted with great black-trunked trees topped with vibrant green. Although it was summer, powerful furnaces puffed from their brazen-grated mouths blasts of hot air that maintained throughout the vast chambers a temperature that exceeded a hundred degrees Fahrenheit, for the physician, accustomed to the incendiary climate of India, shivered beneath our pale sun very much as did that traveler who, returning from the equatorial sources of the Blue Nile, shook with cold in Cairo; as a consequence, Dr. Cherbonneau never left his house save in a closed carriage, and on such occasions he wrapped himself in a coat of Siberian fox, and rested his feet on a foot-warmer filled with boiling water.

His rooms were furnished with low couches covered with stuffs from Malabar, inworked with chimerical elephants and fabulous birds; there were detachable stands, colored and gilded by the Ceylonese with naif barbarity; there were Japanese vases filled with exotic flowers; and on the floor from one end of the apartment to the other was spread one of those funereal carpets sprigged in black and white that the Thugs weave for punishment in prison, and of which the woof seems woven of the hemp from the ropes with which they strangle their victims. And therewith, in the corners, were a few Hindu idols of marble and bronze, the eyes long and almond-shaped, the nose hooped with rings, the lips thick and smiling, necklaced with pearls that descended to the waist, singular and mysterious in their attributes, the legs crossed on supporting pedestals. On the walls hung water-color miniatures by some Calcutta or Lucknow artist representing the Avatars which Vishnu has accomplished: his incarnation in a fish, in a tortoise, in a pig, in a lion with the head of man, in a Brahman dwarf, in Rama, in a hero combating the thousand-armed giant Cartasuciriargunen; in Krishna, the miraculous child in whom the dreams see a Hindu Christ; in Buddha, adorer of the great god Mahadeva; and lastly, representing him asleep in the Milky Way on the five-headed serpent coiled in the form of a supporting dais, and there awaiting the hour when for final incarnation he shall assume the form of that winged white horse which in dropping its hoof upon the universe shall cause the world to cease to be.

In the last room, heated to an even greater degree than the others, M. Balthazar Cherbonneau was seated surrounded by Sanskrit volumes. In these volumes the letters had been made with a stylus on thin tablets of wood, which latter were pierced and strung together on a cord in a way which more closely resembled Venetian blinds than books, at least as European libraries understand them.

In the centre of the room an electric machine, its bottles filled with gold leaf and its glass plates revolved by cranks, raised its complicated and disquieting silhouette beside a mesmeric bucket spiked with numberless iron rods, and in which was plunged a metal lance. M. Cherbonneau was anything but a charlatan, and did not need a stage setting; but, nevertheless, it was difficult to enter this weird retreat without experiencing a little of the impression which, in olden times, the alchemic laboratories must have caused.

Count Olaf Labinski had heard of the miracles realized by the physician, and his half-credulous curiosity had been aroused. The Slav races have a natural leaning towards the marvelous, which the most careful education does not always correct, and, besides, witnesses worthy of belief who had assisted at these séances told things of them which could not be credited until seen, no matter how much confidence one had in the narrator. The count went, therefore, to call on the thaumaturgist.

When he entered Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau's apartment he felt as if surrounded by imperceptible flames; the blood rushed to his head and seethed in the veins of his temples. He was suffocated by the excessive heat, and the lamps burning with aromatic oils, the huge Java flowers swaying their chalices like censers, intoxicated him with their vertiginous emanations and their asphyxiating perfumes. He staggered a few steps towards M. Cherbonneau, who was squatting on his divan in one of those strange fakir-like postures with which Prince Soltikoff has so picturesquely illustrated his book of Indian travels. One might have said, on seeing the angles formed by his joints beneath the folds of his garments, he was a human spider wrapped in his web, and crouching immovable before his prey. At sight of the count his turquoise pupils lighted up in their orbits, as yellow as the bistre of the liverwort, with a phosphorescent gleam, which as quickly died away, as if covered by a voluntary film.

Understanding Olaf's discomfort, the physician extended his hand towards him, and with two or three passes surrounded him with an atmosphere of spring, creating for him a cool paradise out of infernal heat.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked. "Your lungs, accustomed to the Baltic breezes, still icy from their contact with the perpetual snows of the pole, must pant like the bellows of a forge in this scorching air where, nevertheless, I shiver, I, baked, tempered, and, so to speak, calcinated in the furnaces of the sun."

Count Labinski made a sign to show that he no longer suffered from the high temperature of the apartment.

The physician continued in a good-humored tone,—

"Well, you have heard my tricks of legerdemain spoken of, and you want a sample of my skill. Oh, I am cleverer than Comus, Comte, or Bosco."

"My curiosity is not so frivolous," replied the count, "and I have too much respect for one of the princes of science."

"I am not an erudite in the acceptation given to the word; but, on the other hand, in studying certain subjects disdained by science I have mastered some unemployed occult forces, and I produce effects which appear miraculous, though they are perfectly natural. By watching for it, I have sometimes surprised the soul; it has made me confidences by which I have profited, and repeated words which I have retained. The spirit is everything; matter exists only in appearance. The universe is perhaps, but a dream of God, or an irradiation of the Logos in space. I rumple at will the garment of the body; I stop or quicken life, I remove the senses, I do away with distance; I rout pain without chloroform, ether, or other anæsthetic drug. Armed with the force of my will, that electricity of the intellect, I vivify or I annihilate. Nothing is opaque to my eyes; my gaze pierces everything; I discern the radiations of thought; and I can make them pass through my invisible prism and reflect themselves on the white curtain of my brain as the solar spectrums are projected on a screen. But all that is trifling beside the prodigies accomplished by certain yogis of India who have arrived at the sublimest height of asceticism. We Europeans are too superficial, too inattentive, too matter of fact, too much in love with our clay-prison, to open windows on the eternal and the infinite. Nevertheless, as you shall judge, I have obtained a few rather strange results."

Whereupon Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau slid back on a rod the rings of a heavy portière which concealed a sort of alcove situate at the end of the room. By the light of an alcohol flame, which flickered on a bronze tripod, Count Olaf Labinski saw a spectacle, at which, notwithstanding his courage, he shuddered. On a black marble table was a young man, naked to the waist, and immobile as a corpse. Not a drop of blood flowed from his body, which bristled with arrows like that of St. Sebastian. He might have been taken for the colored print of a martyr in which the vermilion tinting of the wounds had been forgotten.

"This eccentric physician," Olaf said to himself, "is perhaps a worshiper of Siva, and has sacrificed a victim to his god."

"Oh, he does not suffer at all; prick him without fear; not a muscle of his face will move," said the physician, drawing the arrows from the body as one takes pins from a cushion.

A few rapid motions of the hands released the patient from the web of emanations which imprisoned him, and he awoke, with an ecstatic smile on his lips, as if from a happy dream. M. Cherbonneau dismissed him with a gesture, and he withdrew by a small door cut in the woodwork with which the alcove was lined.

"I could have cut off a leg or an arm without his perceiving it," said the physician, moving his wrinkles by way of a smile; "I did not do it because as yet I cannot create, and man, in that respect inferior to the lizard, has not a sap sufficiently powerful to remake the members cut from him. But if I do not create, I at least rejuvenate." He raised a veil which covered an aged woman who, lost in a magnetic slumber, was seated in an armchair near the marble table. Her features, which might once have been beautiful, were withered, and the ravages of time could be read in the emaciated outlines of her arms, shoulders, and bust. The physician fixed his blue eyes on her with obstinate intensity for several minutes. Gradually the tremulous lines strengthened, the contour of the bust recovered its virginal purity, smooth white flesh filled the hollows of the throat, the cheeks rounded into the peach-like bloom and freshness of youth, the eyes opened sparkling in liquid vivacity, and the mask of age, lifted as by magic, disclosed a lovely young woman.

"Do you think the Fountain of Youth has somewhere poured forth its miraculous waters?" asked the physician of the count, who stood stupefied by this transformation. "I, at least, believe so, for man invents nothing, and each one of his dreams is a divination or a memory. But let us leave this figure, remodeled for an instant by my will, and consult the young girl tranquilly sleeping in this corner. Question her; she knows more than sages and sibyls. You can send her to one of your seven castles in Bohemia, and ask her what your most secret casket incloses; she will tell you, for it needs but a second for her soul to make the journey, which is not so surprising, after all, since electricity travels seventy thousand leagues in that space of time, and electricity is to thought what the cab is to the train. Give her your hand to put yourself in communication with her; you will not have to formulate your question, she will read it in your mind."

The young girl replied to the mental interrogation of the count in a voice as lifeless as that of a spectre.

"In the cedar casket there is a bit of clay on which can be seen the impress of a small foot."

"Has she guessed correctly?" asked

the physician negligently, as though quite sure of the infallibility of his somnambulist.

The count's cheeks grew crimson. In the earliest days of his love he had taken the imprint of one of Prascovie's footsteps from an alley in a park, and he kept it, like a relic, in a box of the most costly workmanship inlaid with silver and enamel, whose microscopic key he wore hung at his neck on a Venetian chain.

M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, who was a well-bred man, seeing the count's embarrassment, did not insist, but led him to a table, on which was set some water that was crystal in its clarity.

"You have, of course, heard of the magic mirror in which Mephistopheles showed Faust the image of Helen; now, without having a hoof in my silk stocking or plumes in my hat, I am none the less able to entertain you with this innocent phenomenon. Lean over this bowl and think intently of the person you wish to see; living or dead, far or near, she will come at your call from the end of the world or the depths of history."

The count bent over the bowl. Soon the water grew troubled and took on opalescent tints, as if a drop of essence had been poured into it, and a rainbow-hued ring encircled the edge of the dish framing the picture which already sketched itself beneath the creamy cloud.

The mist faded. Through the now transparent water a young woman was revealed. Her loose gown was of lace, her eyes sea green, her hair wavy and golden. Over the ivory keys of a piano her lovely hands strayed like white butterflies. The picture was so marvelous in its perfection that at sight of it artists might have died of despair. It was Prascovie Labinska, who, unconsciously, obeyed the passionate invocation of the count.

"And now let us pass to something more curious," said the physician, grasping the count's hand and placing it on one of the rods belonging to the mesmeric bucket. Olăf had no sooner touched the metal charged with an overpowering magnetism than he fell stunned to the floor.

Taking him in his arms, the physician lifted him up, laid him on the divan, rang, and said to the servant who appeared at the door,—

"Go find M. Octave de Saville."

Chapter VI

THE PHYSICIAN'S GESTURE

In a little while the wheels of a carriage resounded in the silent courtyard of the hotel, and almost simultaneously Octave was announced. When M. Cherbonneau showed him the Count Olaf Labinski stretched on a sofa, apparently lifeless, he was stupefied. At first he thought murder had been committed, and was struck dumb with horror; but, on a closer examination, he noticed that the chest of the sleeper rose and fell with an almost imperceptible respiration.

"There," said the physician, "there is your disguise already prepared. It is a little more difficult to put on than a domino; but Romeo, in climbing to the balcony at Verona, did not worry at the danger he ran of breaking his neck. He knew that Juliet awaited him in the silence of the night. The Countess Prascovie Labinska is well worth the daughter of the Capulets."

Perplexed by the weirdness of the situation, Octave did not answer. His eyes were fixed on the count, whose head slightly thrown back on a cushion gave him the appearance of one of those effigies of knights which, with their stiff necks resting on a carved marble pillow, lie above their tombs in Gothic cloisters. In spite of himself, this chivalrous figure, of which he was to take possession, smote him with remorse.

The physician mistook Octave's perplexity for hesitation. A vaguely disdainful smile flitted across his lips, and he said,—

"If you are not decided I can awaken the count, who will depart as he came, astonished at my magnetic power. But, think it over; such a chance may never repeat itself. Still, however great my interest in your love may be, however much I desire to make an experiment which has never been attempted in Europe, I dare not hide from you that this exchange of souls is perilous. Question your heart. Will you risk your life in this supreme attempt? The Bible says Love is as strong as death."

"I am ready," Octave replied simply.

"Very good," cried the doctor, rubbing his shrunken, brown hands together with an extraordinary rapidity, as if he wished to strike fire in the manner of savages. "A passion which recoils at nothing pleases me. There are but two things in this world—passion and will. If you are not happy it will not be my fault. Ah, Brahma-Logum, from the depths of the sky of Indra, where the Apsaras surround you with their voluptuous choirs, you shall see if I have forgotten the irresistible formula which you gasped in my ear on abandoning your petrified carcass. Word and gestures, I have retained them all. To work! to work! We shall make in our caldron as strange a mess as the witches of Macbeth, without, however, the sorcery of the North. Take this armchair in front of me, and give yourself confidently into my power. Good! eye to eye, hand to hand. Already the charm works. The sense of time and space is lost, consciousness fades, the eyelids fall. The muscles, no longer commanded by the brain, relax; the mind is lulled, and all the delicate threads which hold the soul to the body are untied. Brahma in the golden egg, where he dreamed for ten thousand years, was not farther from external things. Now inundate him with electric currents, bathe him in psychic emanations."

While muttering these disjointed sentences, the physician did not for an instant discontinue his passes. Luminous rays flew from his distended hands and struck his patient on the brow and heart, while around him there gathered slowly a sort of visible atmosphere, phosphorescent like an aureole.

"That is perfect!" exclaimed M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, applauding himself for his success. "Now he is as I want him. But there," he cried, after a pause, as if he read through Octave's skull the last effort of his vanishing personality, "what is it that still resists? What is that mutinous idea which, driven from the circumvolutions of the brain, tries to escape my influence by crouching on the primal monad, in the sphericity of life? But I know how to reach and curb it."

To master this unconscious opposition the physician recharged the magnetic battery of his gaze, and caught the rebel thought between the base of the brain and the insertion of the spinal marrow, the most secret sanctuary, the most mysterious tabernacle of the soul. His triumph was complete.

He next prepared himself with a majestic solemnity for the surprising experiment he was to attempt. Robing himself in a linen gown like a Magi, he washed his hands in perfumed water. He took from different boxes powders, and smeared his brow and cheeks with hierarchic designs. He encircled his arm with the Brahman cord, and read two or three Slokas of the sacred poems, omitting none of the minute rites recommended by the Mahatmas of the isles of Elephanta.

These ceremonies terminated, he threw the doors of the furnaces wide open, and soon the room was filled with an incandescent atmosphere, which would have made tigers swoon in the jungle, cracked the cuirass of mud on the hides of buffaloes, and exploded aloes into bloom.

"The two sparks of divine fire which will now find themselves nude and divested for several seconds of their mortal envelope must not pale or waver in our icy air," said the physician, examining the thermometer, which marked 120 degrees Fahrenheit.

Between the inert bodies Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau, garmented in white, looked like a priest of one of those sanguinary religions which throw the corpses of men on the altars of their gods. Indeed, he recalled that pontiff of Vitziliputzili, of whom Heine speaks in a ballad, though his intentions were necessarily more pacific.

Presently he approached the motionless count and pronounced the ineffable syllable, which he hastened to repeat to Octave, who lay in a profound slumber. M. Balthazar Cherbonneau's face, which under ordinary circumstances was simply fantastic, now assumed a singular majesty. The extent of the power which he wielded ennobled his irregular features, and if any one had witnessed the sacerdotal gravity with which he accomplished these mysterious rites he would not have recognized in him the Hoffmannesque physician who suggested, while defying the pencil of the caricaturist.

Strange things then came to pass: Octave de Saville and Count Olaf Labinski appeared to be simultaneously agitated by a convulsion of agony; their faces, which were of a deathly pallor, twitched nervously, and a slight froth rose to their lips. Two small blue flames scintillated hesitantly over their heads.

The physician made an imperious gesture, which seemed to trace the way for them through the air, and the two phosphorescent sparks began to move. They crossed to their new abodes, leaving a trail of light behind them. Octave's soul entered the body of Count Labinski, and the count's soul entered that of Octave. The avatar was accomplished.

A flush of red at the cheek-bones showed that life had reëntered the human clay, which, an instant soulless, would, without the physician's power, have become the prey of the angel of death.

Cherbonneau's blue eyes gleamed

with joy at his triumph, and he said to himself, as he strode up and down the room, "I should like to see the most noted physicians do as much,—they who are so proud of mending the human machine when it gets out of order: Hippocrates, Galen, Paracelsus, Van Helmont, Boerhaave, Tronchin, Hahnemann, Rasori, the most insignificant Indian fakir squatting on the steps of a pagoda knows a thousand times more than you! What matters the body when one can command the spirit?"

At the end of his sentence Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau cut several capers of exultation, and danced like the hills in the Sir-Hasirim of Solomon; but, catching his foot in the hem of his Brahman gown, he almost fell on his nose, a trifling accident, which recalled him to his senses and calmed his excitement.

"Now to awake my sleeping friends," said he, after he had removed the smears of the colored powder with which he had streaked his face, and tossed aside his Brahman costume. Placing himself before the body of Count Labinski, which contained Octave's soul, he made the passes necessary to awaken him from his somnambulistic state, shaking from his fingers at each gesture the electric fluid withdrawn.

After a few minutes Octave-Labinski (hereafter we will so call him for the clearness of the story) rose on his elbow, rubbed his hands across his eyes, and cast around him a look of astonishment, not yet lighted by the consciousness of self. When a finer perception of objects returned to him the first thing he noticed was his own form placed quite away from him on a sofa. He saw himself, not reflected by a mirror, but in reality. He gave a cry,—to his horror, this cry did not resound in his own tone of voice; the exchange of souls having occurred during the magnetic sleep, he had no recollection of it, and felt a strange sense of discomfort. His mind, served by new organs, was like a workman whose habitual tools had been taken away and replaced by others. Psyche, exiled, beat with restless wings the vault of this unfamiliar skull, and lost herself in the mazes of a brain in which still lingered traces of unfamiliar thoughts.

When the physician had sufficiently enjoyed Octave's surprise he said, "Well, how do you like your new habitation? Is your soul at home in the body of this handsome cavalier, hetman, hospodar, magnate, and husband of the most beautiful woman in the world? You no longer mean to let yourself die, as was your intention the first time I saw you in your gloomy apartment of the Rue Saint-Lazare now that the doors of the Labinski mansion are open to you, and you need not fear that Prascovie will close your mouth with her hand, as in the Villa Salviati, when you wish to speak of love. You see now that old Balthazar Cherbonneau, in spite of his hideous face,—which, by the way, he can change when he wants to,—has still rather good recipes in his box of tricks."

"Doctor," replied Octave-Labinski, "you have the power of a god, or at least of a demon."

"Oh, oh, do not fear; there is not the slightest deviltry in this! Your salvation is not in danger. I shall not make you sign a compact with a flourish. Nothing could be simpler than what has happened. The Logos which has created light can surely displace a soul. If men would but hearken to God across time and infinity they would see things even more surprising than that."

"With what gratitude, with what devotion, can I acknowledge this inestimable service?"

"You owe me nothing. You interest me; and to an old Lascar like myself, bronzed by every sun, hardened to every event, an emotion is a rare occurrence. You have revealed love to me, and you know we dreamers, who are more or less alchemists, magicians, and philosophers, all seek the absolute. But get up, move about, and see if your new skin is uncomfortable."

Octave-Labinski obeyed, and took a turn or two about the room. Already he was less awkward; though occupied by another soul, the body of the count retained the impulsion of its ordinary habits, and the new guest confided himself to these physical memories, for it was important for him to have the walk, the air, and the gestures of the former proprietor.

"Had I not myself but just operated the exchange of your souls," Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau said, laughing, "I should think that nothing unusual had happened during the evening, and I should take you for the true, legitimate, and authentic Lithuanian Count Olaf Labinski, whose real self still sleeps there in the chrysalis which you have disdainfully discarded. But it will soon be midnight; and if you do not want Prascovie to scold you, or accuse you of preferring lansquenet or baccarat to her, you had now better go. You must not begin your married life with a quarrel; it would be a bad omen. In the meantime, I will busy myself in awakening your former envelope with all the care and respect it deserves."

Recognizing the importance of the physician's suggestion, Octave-Labinski hastened to leave. At the foot of the steps the count's magnificent bay horses snorted with impatience, and in champing their bits had flecked the pavement about them with froth. On Octave's appearance a superb green-garbed groom, of the lost race of heyduques, hurried to the carriage-step, which he lowered with a bang. Octave, who had first turned mechanically towards his modest brougham, installed himself in the splendid vehicle, and said to the chasseur, who flung the order to the coachman, "Home!" The door was hardly closed when the horses started, and the descendant of Almanzors and Azolans, aided by the large cords, swung himself up behind with a lightness one would not have expected of his immense size.

The distance between the Rue du Regard and the Faubourg Saint-Honoré is not long; it was covered in a few minutes; and presently the huge portals of the mansion opened and gave way for the carriage, which swept about a large graveled courtyard, and stopped with remarkable precision under a pink-and-white striped awning.

The courtyard was vast. Octave-Labinski took in the details with that rapidity of vision which the mind acquires on certain important occasions. Surrounded with symmetrical buildings, and lighted by bronze lamp-posts of which the gas darted white tongues of flame into crystal lanterns resembling those that in olden times ornamented the Bucentaur, the Labinski mansion looked more like a palace than a mere house. Boxes of orange trees, worthy of the terrace at Versailles, stood at equal distances along the edge of the asphalt, which framed, like a border, the carpet of turf forming the centre.

The transformed lover, on setting his foot on the threshold, was obliged to pause an instant and press his hand to his heart to still its beating. He had, indeed, the body of Count Olaf Labinski, but he possessed only its physical attributes; all the ideas belonging to the brain had flown with the soul of its first proprietor,—this house, which was henceforth to be his, was strange to him; he was even ignorant of its interior arrangements. A staircase rose before him; he followed where it led, determined to attribute to abstraction any mistake he might make. The polished stone step shone brilliantly, and threw into relief the opulent crimson of the broad strip of velvet carpet, which, held in place by rods of gilded brass, traced the way softly under foot. Stands, filled with beautiful exotic plants, lined the stair. An immense windowed lantern, suspended by a heavy rope of knotted and tasseled purple silk, flashed golden shimmers over the stucco walls, smooth and white as marble, and threw a flood of light on a reproduction on one of Canova's most celebrated groups, Cupid embracing Psyche.

The landing of the first and only story was paved with mosaics of costly design, and on the walls, hung by silken cords, were four pictures, the work of Paris Bordone, Bonifazzio, Palma the elder, and Paul Veronese, whose architectural and pompous style harmonized with the magnificence of the staircase.

A high baize door, studded with gold nails, opened on the landing. Octave Labinski pushed it, and found himself in a large antechamber, where drowsed several liveried footmen, who at his approach rose as if on springs, and ranged themselves along the walls with the impassibility of Oriental slaves. He passed on. A white-and-gold drawing-room succeeded the antechamber, but there was no one in it. Octave rang a bell. A maid appeared.

"Can madame receive me?"

"Her ladyship is undressing, but she will be visible presently."

Chapter VII

HIS FORMER BODY

Left alone with the body of Octave de Saville, which the soul of Count Olaf Labinski inhabited, Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau set himself to work to bring it back to every-day life. After a few passes Olaf-de Saville (we must now unite these two names to designate a double personage) came out of the profound slumber, or rather catalepsy, which had chained him, like a spectre from Hades, stiff and motionless, to the sofa. He rose with an automatic movement, undirected as yet by the will, and staggered from dizziness. Objects swayed about him; the incarnations of Vishnu on the walls danced a saraband. Dr. Cherbonneau, waving his arms like wings, and rolling his blue eyes in wrinkled, brown orbits which looked like the rims of spectacles, appeared to him as the Mahatma of Elephanta. The weird sights at which he had assisted before falling into the mesmeric trance reacted on his reason, and he grasped reality slowly. He resembled a sleeper suddenly awakened from a nightmare, who mistakes the clothes scattered over the furniture for vague, human shapes, and thinks the brass curtain knobs, shining with the reflection of the night-light, are the flaming eyes of cyclops.

Little by little this phantasmagoria evaporated, and things resumed their natural aspect; M. Balthazar Cherbonneau was no longer an Indian fakir, but a plain doctor of medicine, who smiled at his patient with commonplace good nature.

"Are you satisfied, sir," he said, in a tone of obsequious humility, in which could be discerned a shade of irony; "are you satisfied with the experiments which I have had the honor to make before you? I dare to hope that you will not much regret your evening, and that you will leave here convinced that all that is told of magnetism is not, as official science affirms, mere fable and jugglery."

Olaf-de Saville nodded assent, and left the apartment accompanied by Dr. Cherbonneau, who made him a low bow at each door.

The brougham drove up, grazing the steps, and the soul of the Countess Labinska's husband, which inhabited Octave de Saville's body, entered it without noticing that neither the livery nor the carriage was his.

The coachman asked where his master wished to go.

"Home," answered Olaf-de Saville, confusedly, astonished at not hearing the voice of the chasseur who usually asked him this question with a most pronounced Hungarian accent. The brougham in which he found himself was upholstered with dark-blue damask; his own coupé was lined with buttercup colored satin, and the count, though surprised, accepted it all much as one does in a dream where ordinary objects present themselves under strange aspects without however ceasing to be recognizable. He felt smaller than usual; also, it seemed to him he had gone to the physician's in evening dress; yet, without remembrance of having changed his clothes, he saw that he wore a summer suit of thin material, which had never formed part of his wardrobe. His mind was confused, and his thoughts, so lucid in the morning, unraveled themselves laboriously. Attributing this singular state to the weird scenes of the evening, he thought no more of it; and leaning his head against the side of the carriage, he drifted into an undefined reverie, a vague dreaminess, which was neither waking nor sleeping.

The sudden halt of the horse, and the coachman's voice shouting "Gate!" recalled him to himself; he lowered the window, put out his head, and saw by the light of a lamp an unfamiliar street, and a house which was not his own.

"Where the devil have you brought me, fool?" he cried; "are we in the Faubourg Saint-Honoré,—Hotel Labinski?"

"Excuse me, sir; I did not understand," muttered the coachman, turning his horse in the direction indicated.

During the transit the transformed count asked himself several questions which he was unable to answer. Why had his own carriage left without him, since he had ordered it to wait? Why did he find himself in some one else's. For the moment he fancied that the clearness of his perceptions must be obscured by fever, or perhaps that the thaumaturgistic doctor, to impress his credulity more keenly, had made him inhale in his sleep hashish or some other hallucinating drug, whose illusions would be dispelled by a night's rest.

The carriage reached the Labinski mansion. The Suisse, when summoned, refused to open the door, saying it was not a reception evening, and adding that his master had returned an hour ago, and her ladyship had retired.

"Fool, are you drunk or crazy?" cried Olaf-de Saville, pushing aside the giant who rose colossal from the threshold of the half-open door, like one of those bronze statues which, in Arab tales, defend from wandering knights the entrance to enchanted castles.

"Drunk or crazy yourself, my little gentleman," answered the man, who from his natural crimson turned purple with anger.

"Scoundrel!" roared Olaf-de Saville, "did I not respect myself"—

"Be quiet, or I will break you across my knee and throw the pieces on the sidewalk," replied the giant, opening a hand larger than the huge plaster hand in the glove shop of the Rue Richelieu; "you must not be ugly with me, my little man, because you have drunk too much champagne."

Olaf-de Saville, exasperated, shoved the Suisse so fiercely that he got by under the porch. Several footmen who were still up ran forward at the noise of the altercation.

"I discharge you, stupid animal, wretch, villain! You shall not even spend the night in the house. Go, or I will kill you as I would a mad dog. Do not force me to spill the base blood of a lackey."

And the count, dispossessed of his body, with blood-shot eyes, foaming lips, and clinched hands, rushed at the enormous Suisse, who grasped his aggressor's hands in one of his own, and held them almost crushed in the vise of his short, thick fingers, fleshy and knotted like those of a mediæval torturer.

"There now," said the giant, who, good-natured enough in the main, and fearing nothing more from his adversary, simply gave him a shake or two to keep him respectful. "There now, is there any sense in getting into such a state when one is dressed like a man of the world, and then come like a rowdy making a racket at night in respectable houses? One owes a certain consideration to wine, and that which has made you so drunk must be famous, that is why I do not knock you down, and I shall just put you gently out on the sidewalk, where the watchman will pick you up if you continue your uproar. A breath of prison air will sharpen your wits."

"Rascals," cried Olaf-de Saville to the assembled lackeys, "you allow this low varlet to insult your master, the noble Count Labinski!"

At this name the footmen with one accord gave a loud shout; a burst of laughter, Homeric and convulsive, lifted their galloon-covered chests.

"This little gentleman who thinks himself the Count Labinski! ha, ha, ha! the idea is good!"

An icy sweat broke out on Olaf-de Saville's temples. A sharp thought pierced his brain like a dagger, and he felt the marrow freeze in his bones. Was Smarra's knee on his chest, or was this real life? Had his reason foundered in the bottomless sea of magnetism, or was he the plaything of some diabolical machination? Not one of his servants, so trembling, so submissive, so prostrate before him, recognized their master. Had his body been changed as well as his clothing and carriage?

"That you may be very sure of not being the Count Labinski," said one of the most insolent of the group, "look, there he is, aroused by your clamor, descending the steps himself."

The Suisse's captive turned his eyes towards the end of the court, and saw, erect under the awning of the marquise, a slender, graceful young man, with oval face, black eyes, aquiline nose, and slight mustache, a young man who was none other than himself, or else his own ghost modeled by the devil with delusive cunning.

The Suisse dropped the hands which he held imprisoned. The lackeys ranged themselves respectfully against the wall, and with lowered eyes, hanging hands, in an absolute immobility, like pages at the approach of the Sultan, they rendered to this phantom the honors which the real count was denied.

Prascovie's husband, though brave as a Slav, a term which implies everything, felt an unspeakable terror at the approach of this Ménechme, who in mingling with real life and making his double unrecognizable was far more terrible than on the stage. An ancient family legend came to his mind and increased his dread. Each time a Labinski was to die, he was warned by the appearance of a phantom exactly similar to himself. Among northern nations to see one's double, even in a dream, is always regarded as a fatal omen, and the intrepid warrior of the Caucasus, at the aspect of this external vision of his own self, was seized with an insurmountable superstitious horror. He who would have plunged his arm in the mouth of a loaded cannon recoiled at sight of himself.

Octave-Labinski advanced towards his former body, in which the count's indignant soul was struggling and shivering, and said, in a tone of cold and haughty politeness,—

"Sir, do not compromise yourself with these servants. The Count Labinski, if you wish to speak to him, is visible from noon until two o'clock. The countess receives on Thursdays those who have had the honor to be presented to her."

Having uttered these sentences slowly, and emphasized each syllable, the pseudo-count quietly withdrew, and the doors closed behind him.

Olaf-de Saville was put in his carriage unconscious. When he came to his senses he was lying on a bed unlike his own in shape, in a room which he did not remember ever to have entered. At his side stood a strange servant, who raised his head and made him smell a bottle of salts. "Do you feel better, sir?" Jean asked the count, whom he took for his master.

"Yes," answered Olaf-de Saville; "it was nothing but a momentary faintness."

"Shall I leave you, sir, or had I better sit up?"

"No, leave me; but, before going, light the candelabra by the mirror."

"You are not afraid, sir, that the light will prevent your sleeping?"

"Not at all; besides, I am not yet sleepy."

"I shall not go to bed, sir," said Jean, inwardly alarmed at the count's pallor and drawn features, "and if you need anything I will come at the first sound of the bell."

When Jean, after lighting the candles, had gone, the count hurried to the mirror, and in the clear glass where the scintillations of the lights flickered he saw the face of a young man that was sad and gentle, he saw abundant black hair, eyes of a sombre azure, and pale cheeks covered with a dark, silky beard. In fact, a visage which was not his own, and which gazed at him from the depths of the mirror with an air of surprise. At first he tried to believe that some practical joker was framing his face in the brass and inlaid mother-of-pearl border of the Venetian mirror. He felt behind it; there was no one.

His hands, which he then examined, were longer, thinner, and more veined than his own. On the fourth finger projected a heavy gold ring with a seal, on which was engraved a coat-of-arms,—a shield divided, gules and silver, surmounted by a baron's crown. This ring had never belonged to the count, who wore one that bore an eagle displayed in sable, and for crest a pearled coronet. He searched his pockets and drew out a small card-case containing visiting cards with the name: "Octave de Saville."

The laughter of the lackeys at the Hotel Labinski, the apparition of his double, the unknown physiognomy substituted for his own reflection in the mirror, all this might possibly be the illusions of a disordered brain; but these different clothes, the ring which he took from his finger, were material, palpable proofs, evidence not to be denied. A complete metamorphosis had taken place in him without his knowledge. A magician, without doubt, a devil perhaps, had stolen from him his form, his nobility, his name, his whole personality, leaving him only his soul without means to manifest it. The fantastic stories of Pierre Schlemil and the Tale of Saint Sylvester's Night came to his mind. But La Motte-Fouqué and Hoffmann's characters had only lost the one his shadow, and the other his reflection, and if this strange loss of a projection which every one possesses inspired vexatious suspicions, at least no one denied that they were themselves.

The count's position was far worse. He could not claim his own title with the body in which he was now imprisoned. In the eyes of the world he would pass for an impudent imposter, or at least for a madman. In this deceitful envelope even his wife would disown him. How could he prove to her his identity? Yet surely there were a thousand familiar events, a thousand intimate details unknown to every one else, which, recalled to Prascovie, would make her recognize her husband's soul in this disguise; but of what use would her recognition be even if he obtained it, against the verdict of the world?

He was really and absolutely dispossessed of his self. And he had another anxiety. Was his transformation limited to the exterior change of figure and features, or did he really inhabit the body of another? In this case, what had been done with his own? Had a lime pit consumed it, or had it become the property of some bold marauder? The double seen at the Hotel Labinski could be a spectre, a vision perhaps, but it might also be a physical being, installed in the skin which that fakir-faced physician had stolen from him with infernal skill.

A frightful idea stung his heart like a viper's fang: "But this fictitious Count Labinski pressed into my shape by the devil's hands, this vampire who is now living in my house, whom my servants obey in spite of me, perhaps at this moment he is setting his cloven hoof on the threshold of that room where I have never entered less agitated than on the first night. And does Prascovie smile and, with a divine blush, lean her charming head on that shoulder marked by the devil's claw, taking for me that lying shell, that ghoul, that hideous son of night and hell? Shall I rush to the house, and setting it on fire, shout amid the flames to Prascovie: 'You are deceived; it is not your beloved Olaf whom you press to your heart! You are about to commit an abominable crime which my despairing soul will still remember when Time is weary of turning his hour-glass!'"

Waves of flame surged through the count's brain. He gave inarticulate cries of rage, gnawed his knuckles, and paced the room like a wild beast. Insanity was about to submerge the dim consciousness of self which remained to him. He ran to Octave's toilet table, filled a basin with water, and plunged his head into an icy bath.

His presence of mind returned. He told himself that the age of magic and sorcery was past; that death alone separated body and soul; that in the centre of Paris a Polish count accredited with several millions at Rothschilds, related to the best families, the beloved husband of a fashionable woman, and decorated with the Order of Saint-André, could not be juggled with in this way. All this was undoubtedly but a joke, in very bad taste, indeed, but still a joke of M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, a joke which could be explained as naturally as the bugbears of Anne Radcliffe's novels. As he was worn out with fatigue he threw himself on Octave's bed, and fell into a deep sleep, so heavy that it resembled death, and which lasted until Jean, thinking his master awake, came in to lay the letters and newspapers on the table.

Chapter VIII

DOCTOR OF THE DEVIL

The count opened his eyes and cast about him an investigating look. He saw a comfortable but simple bedroom. A carpet, spotted in imitation of a leopard skin, covered the floor, and tapestry curtains, which Jean had just drawn back, hung at the windows and hid the doors; on the walls was a green velvet paper simulating cloth. A clock cut from a block of black marble, with a metal dial, surmounted by the statuette of Diana in oxidized silver reduced by Barbedienne, and accompanied by two antique vases also in silver, decorated the mantel, which was of white marble veined with blue. The Venetian mirror in which the count had discovered the previous evening that he did not possess his usual face, and the portrait of an old lady painted by Flandrin, without doubt Octave's mother, were the only ornaments of this rather sad, sedate chamber.

A divan, an arm-chair near the fireplace, a study table covered with books and papers, furnished the room comfortably, but in no wise recalled the sumptuousness of the Hotel Labinski.

"Will you get up, sir?" said Jean in the careful voice which he had adopted during Octave's illness, as he handed the count the silk shirt, flannel trousers, and Algerian gandoura, which formed his master's morning costume. Though the count revolted at putting on a stranger's clothes, he was obliged to accept those Jean offered him or remain naked; so he put his feet down on the soft black bearskin rug at the side of the bed.

His toilet was soon finished, and Jean, without appearing to have the least doubt as to the identity of the false Octave de Saville whom he helped to dress, asked him, "At what hour will you breakfast, sir?"

"At the usual hour," replied the count, who had resolved to outwardly accept his incomprehensible transformation so as not to raise obstacles to the steps he intended to take to recover his personality.

Jean left the room, and Olaf-de Saville opened the two letters which had come with the newspapers, hoping to get from them some information. The first contained friendly reproaches, and complained that the old habits of comradeship were interrupted without motive; it was signed with a name unknown to him. The second was from Octave's lawyer, and urged him to come and draw a quarter's income long due him, or at least to designate an investment for this money which was lying unproductive.

"So it seems," the count said to himself, "that the Octave de Saville whose body I occupy much against my will really exists. He is not a fanciful being, a character of Achim Arnim or of Clément Brentano: he has an apartment, friends, a lawyer, an income greater than his wants, in fact everything which constitutes the legal status of a gentleman. Nevertheless, it seems to me I am the Count Olaf Labinski."

A glance in the mirror convinced him that this opinion would be shared by no one; reflection was the same by the clear daylight as by the uncertain flicker of the candles.

In continuing the domiciliary visit he opened the drawers of the table: in one he found title deeds of property, two one-thousand-franc notes, and fifty louis, which he appropriated without scruple for the needs of the campaign which he was about to begin; while in the other drawer he noticed a Russian leather portfolio closed by a patent lock.

Jean entered announcing M. Alfred Humbert, who rushed into the room with the familiarity of an old friend without waiting till the servant returned with his master's answer.

"Good morning, Octave," said the newcomer, a handsome young man with a frank, cordial manner; "what are you up to, what has become of you, are you dead or alive? No one sees you; I write, you do not answer. I should avoid you, but I have no false pride in matters of affection, and I come to see how you are. Good heavens! I cannot let a college friend die of melancholy in the depths of this apartment which is as lugubrious as one of Charles the Fifth's cells in the Yuste Monastery. You imagine you are ill, but you are bored, that is all. I shall force you to distract yourself, and I mean to play the despot and take you to a jolly breakfast in which Gustave Raimbaud buries his bachelor freedom."

Uttering this tirade in a half angry, half humorous tone, he took the count's hand in his and shook it vigorously.

"No," answered Prascovie's husband, entering into the spirit of his part, "I am even more indisposed today than usual; I am not in good condition; I should sadden and depress you."

"It is true you are pale and you look tired. I will wait for a more favorable occasion. I am off, for I am late for three dozen oysters and a bottle of Sauterne," said Alfred, going towards the door. "Raimbaud will be sorry not to see you."

This visit increased the count's depression. Jean took him for his master, Alfred for his friend. A last trial awaited him. The door opened, and a lady whose hair was streaked with gray, and who in the most striking manner resembled the portrait on the wall, entered the room, took a seat on the sofa, and said to the count,—

"How are you, my poor Octave? Jean has told me that you came in late yesterday in a state of alarming weakness; do take care of yourself, my dear son, for you know how much I love you notwithstanding the grief caused me by this inexplicable melancholy, the secret of which you have never been willing to confide."

"Fear nothing, mother, it is not serious," replied Olaf-de Saville; "I am much better today."

Reassured, Mme. de Saville rose and departed, not wishing to annoy her son, who, she knew, disliked to be long disturbed in his solitude.

"Now I am decidedly Octave de Saville," cried the count when the old lady had gone; "his mother recognizes me, and does not divine a stranger under her son's epidermis. Perhaps I am then forever immured in this envelope. What a curious prison for a soul is the body of another! It is hard though to renounce being the Count Olaf Labinski, to lose his coat-of-arms, his wife, his fortune, and to be reduced to a miserable commonplace existence. Oh! to get out of it I would tear this skin of Nessus which clings to me, and I would return it to its owner in a thousand shreds. Shall I go back to the hotel? No!—I should make a terrible scandal, and the Suisse would throw me out, for I have no strength in this invalid's dressing-gown. I must think, and look about me, for I must know something about the life of this Octave de Saville who is at present myself."

He tried to open the portfolio. Touched by chance the spring yielded, and the count drew from the leather pockets first a number of sheets of paper blackened with fine, close writing, and then a square of vellum. On this an unskilled but faithful hand had drawn, with love's memory and a resemblance not always attained by great artists, a crayon portrait which it was impossible not to recognize at the first glance. It was the Countess Prascovie Labinska!

At this discovery the count was stupefied. A feeling of furious jealousy succeeded his surprise; how did the countess' portrait come to be in the private portfolio of this strange young man? how did he get it? who had made it? who had given it to him? Had the religiously adored Prascovie descended from her sky of love to a vulgar intrigue? What infernal jest incarnated him, the husband, in the body of the lover of this woman, till then believed so pure? After being the husband, he was to be the lover! Sarcastic metamorphosis, a reversal of position sufficient to turn one's brain, he might trick himself, be at the same time Clitandre and Georges Dandin! All these ideas buzzed tumultuously in his mind; he felt he was losing his reason, and he made a supreme effort of will to regain a little composure. Without hearing Jean announce that breakfast was ready, he continued with nervous trepidation the examination of the mysterious portfolio.

The leaves composed a sort of psychological journal, abandoned and resumed at different intervals. Here are several fragments devoured by the count with anxious curiosity.

"She will never love me, never, never! I have read in her soft eyes the cruel sentence than which Dante could find nothing more severe to inscribe on the bronze gates of the *Cité Dolente:* 'Lose all hope.' What have I done to God to be damned alive? Tomorrow, after tomorrow, always, it will be the same. The planets may intercross their orbits, the stars in conjunction may knot, but nothing in my destiny will change. With a word she has dispelled the dream; with a gesture broken the chimera's wings. The fabulous combinations of the impossible offer me no chance; the numbers thrown a million times in fortune's wheel will never come up,—there is no winning number for me!

"Fool that I am! I know that paradise is closed to me, and I sit stupidly on the threshold, with my back against the door which will not open, and I weep silently, without violence, without effort, as if my eyes were living springs. I have not the courage to rise and plunge into the immense desert or into the tumultuous Babel of men.

"When, sometimes, in the night I cannot sleep, I think of Prascovie; if I sleep I dream of her. Oh, how beautiful she was that day in the garden of the Villa Salviati, at Florence! That white dress with the black ribbons, it was charming and funereal! The white for her, the black for me! Now and then the ribbons stirred by the breeze formed a cross on the background of startling white, an invisible spirit was murmuring the death mass of my heart.

"Should some surprising catastrophe tiara my brow with the crown of an emperor or caliph, should the earth bleed for me her veins of gold, should the diamond mines of Golconda and of Visiapour allow me to dig in their sparkling galleries, should Byron's lyre resound under my fingers, should the most perfect works of antique and modern art lend me their charms, should I discover a new world, well, for all that I would not be further advanced!

"On what a thread hangs fate! If I had had the desire to go to Constantinople I should not have met her; I stay in Florence, I see her, and I die.

"I should have killed myself, but she breathes the air in which I live, and perhaps my covetous lip may seize—

oh, ineffable joy!—a distant emanation of that perfumed breath. And, besides, my guilty soul would be assigned to an exile's planet, and I should lose the chance to make her love me in another life. To be separated there, she in paradise, I in hell: oh, maddening thought!

"Why must I love precisely the one woman who cannot love me! Others, called beautiful, who were free, smiled on me with their tenderest smiles, and seemed to invite an avowal which did not come. Oh, how happy is he! What sublimity of former life does God recompense in him by the magnificent gift of her love?"

It was unnecessary to read further. The suspicion which the count had conceived at sight of Prascovie's portrait had vanished at the first lines of this sad confession. He understood that the cherished image, recommenced a thousand times, had been drawn far from the model with the tender and indefatigable patience of an unhappy love, and that it was the madonna of a mystical shrine, before which kneeled a hopeless adoration.

"But perhaps this Octave has made a compact with the devil to divest me of my body, and then in my form to profit by Prascovie's unsuspecting love!"

Though it troubled him strangely, the improbability of such a supposition in these modern days made the count soon discard it.

Smiling to himself at his credulity, he ate the now cold breakfast which Jean had brought, then dressed, and ordered the carriage. When it was ready, he had himself driven to Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau's, and crossed the rooms which he had entered the day before as the Count Olaf Labinski, and from which he had come out saluted by all the world with the name of Octave de Saville. The physician was seated, as usual, on the divan in the farthest room, holding his foot in his hand, and seemingly plunged in a profound meditation.

At the sound of the count's steps he raised his head.

"Ah! it is you, my dear Octave. I was about to go to you, but it is a good sign when the invalid comes to the physician."

"Always Octave! I think I shall go mad with rage," thought the count. Then crossing his arms, he stood in front of the physician, and fastening on him a terrible look, said,—

"You know perfectly, M. Balthazar Cherbonneau, that I am not Octave, but Count Olaf Labinski, and you know it, because last evening, on this very spot you stole my skin by means of your foreign witchcraft."

At these words the doctor gave a shout of laughter, fell back on his cushions, and held his sides to restrain the convulsions of his gayety.

"Moderate this excessive mirth of which you may repent, doctor. I speak seriously."

"So much the worse! that proves that the anæsthesia and the hypochondria for which I have been treating you are turning into insanity. I must change the regimen, that is all."

"I do not know what keeps me from strangling you with my hands, you doctor of the devil," cried the count, advancing towards Cherbonneau.

The physician smiled at the count's menace, and touched him with the end of a little steel rod. Olaf-de Saville received a frightful shock, and thought his arm was broken.

"Oh! we have means to compel invalids when they resist," said Cherbonneau, turning on him the look, cold as a douche, which conquers madmen and subdues the lion. "Go home, take a bath, and this excitement will pass away."

Confused by the electric shock, Olaf-de Saville left Dr. Cherbonneau's, more upset and uncertain than ever. He had himself driven to Passy to consult Dr. B.

To this celebrated physician he said, "I am the prey of a strange hallucination; when I look in the glass my face does not appear to me with its usual features; the objects which surround me are changed; I do not recognize either the walls or the furniture of my room; it seems to me that I am not myself but some one else."

"Under what aspect do you see yourself?" asked the physician; "the delusion may come from the eyes or from the brain."

"I see myself with black hair, dark blue eyes, and a pale face framed by a beard."

"A passport description could not be more exact: you have neither mental hallucination nor perverted sight. You are, in fact, just as you describe."

"Oh, no! I have really fair hair, black eyes, tanned skin, and a slight mustache *à la hongroise*."

"Here," replied the physician, "begins an alteration of the mental faculties."

"Nevertheless, doctor, I am not in the least insane."

"Quite true. It is only sane people who come to me of themselves. A little fatigue, some excess in study or pleasure, has caused this trouble. You are mistaken; the vision is real, the idea chimerical: instead of being fair and seeing yourself dark, you are dark and think yourself fair."

"Still, I am sure of being Count Olaf Labinski, but since yesterday every one calls me Octave de Saville."

"That is precisely what I said," answered the doctor. "You are M. de Saville, and you imagine yourself to be Count Labinski, whom I remember to have seen, and who, as you say, is fair. That explains perfectly why you see yourself in the mirror with another face; this face which is yours does not correspond with your idea and surprises you. Remember this, that every one calls you M. de Saville, and consequently does not share your belief. Come and spend a fortnight here; the baths, the rest, the walks under the large trees, will dissipate this annoying impression."

The count bowed and promised to come again. He no longer knew what to think. He returned to the apartment in the Rue Saint Lazare, and by chance saw on the table the invitation of the Countess Labinska, which Octave had shown to M. Cherbonneau.

"With this talisman," he cried to himself, "I can see her tomorrow."

Chapter IX

THWARTED

When the real Count Labinski, chased from his terrestrial paradise by the false guardian angel who stood on the threshold, had been taken to his carriage by the servants, the transformed Octave went back to the little cream-and-gold salon to wait the countess' leisure.

Leaning against a white marble mantel of which the hearth was filled with flowers, he saw himself reflected in the depths of the glass placed on a gilt-legged console opposite. Though he was in the secret of his metamorphosis, or, to speak more exactly, of his transposition, he had some difficulty in persuading himself that this image, so different from his own, was the reflection of his present form, and he could not turn his eyes from the phantom stranger who yet had become himself. He gazed at himself and saw some one else. Involuntarily he looked to see if the Count Olaf were not leaning on the mantel beside him and thus throwing his reflection in the mirror. But he was quite alone. Dr. Cherbonneau had done the thing thoroughly.

After a few minutes, Octave-Labinski ceased to consider the marvelous avatar which had placed his soul in the body of Prascovie's husband; his thoughts took a turn more comformable to his situation. This incredible event, of which the wildest visionary would not in his delirium have dared to dream, had been brought about. He was to find himself in the presence of the beautiful and adored being, and she would not repulse him! The only combination which could unite his happiness with the immaculate virtue of the countess was achieved!

At the approach of this supreme moment his soul underwent the most dreadful agony and anxiety; the timidity of true love made it as weak as were it still in the despised body of Octave de Saville.

The entrance of the maid put an end to his combat with this tumult of thoughts. At sight of her he could not control a nervous start, and the blood surged to his heart when she said,—

"Her ladyship can receive you now, sir."

Octave-Labinski followed the woman, for he was unfamiliar with the different parts of the house and did not wish to betray his ignorance by taking uncertain steps. The maid showed him into a good-sized room; it was a dressing-room ornamented with all the most delicate refinements of luxury. A set of wardrobes in precious wood carved by Knecht and Lienhart, formed a sort of architectural wainscoting, a portico of capricious style, rare elegance, and finished execution. The doors were separated by columns around which heart-shaped leaves of convolvuli and bell-like flowers, cut with infinite skill, twined in ascending spirals. In these wardrobes were kept gowns of velvet and of silk, cashmeres, wraps, laces, cloaks of sable and blue fox, hats of a thousand shapes, and all the belongings of a pretty woman.

Opposite, the same idea was repeated with this difference, that the smooth panels were replaced by mirrors revolving on hinges like the leaves of a screen, so that it was possible to see the face, profile, or back, and to judge of the effect of a bodice or a head-dress. On the third side was a long toilet-table with an alabaster-onyx top, where the silver faucets spouted hot and cold water into huge Japanese bowls set in an open-work rim of the same metal; Bohemian glass bottles sparkling in the candlelight like diamonds and rubies, contained essences and perfumes.

The walls and ceiling were tufted with Nile green satin, like the inside of a jewel-case. A thick Smyrna rug, with softly blending colors, wadded the floor.

On a green velvet pedestal in the centre of the room was set a large chest of fantastic shape in Khorassan steel, chased, embossed, and engraved with arabesques amplificated enough to make the ornamentation of the Ambassadors' Hall in the Alhambra appear simplicity itself. Oriental art seemed to have done its best in this marvelous work, in which the fairy fingers of the Peris must surely have taken part. It was in this chest that the Countess Prascovie Labinska inclosed her ornaments, jewels fit for a queen, which she wore rarely, thinking, with reason, that they were not worth the place they covered. Her woman's instinct told her that she was too beautiful to need magnificence! In consequence, they only saw the light on solemn occasions when the hereditary pomp of the ancient Labinski family had to appear in all its splendor. Diamonds never lay more idle.

Near the window, whose ample curtains hung in heavy folds, the Countess Prascovie Labinska, radiantly fair and beautiful, was seated at a lace-covered dressing table, before a mirror held towards her by two angels carved by Mlle. de Fauveau with the fragile elegance which characterizes that lady's talent; two candelabra, each with six candles, flooded her with light. An ideally fine Algerian burnous, with blue and white stripes in alternation opaque and transparent, enveloped her like a fleecy cloud; the thin material had slipped from the satiny tissue of the shoulders, and revealed the lines of a throat beside which the snow-white neck of a swan would have appeared gray indeed. The opening of the folds was filled by the laces of a batiste gown, a nocturnal attire without a restraining belt. The countess' hair was undone, and fell behind her in a mass as opulent as the mantle of an empress. The flowing golden locks, from which Venus Aphrodite kneeling in her mother-of-pearl shell wrung the drops when she rose like a flower from the blue Ionian Sea, were not more blonde or luxurious! Blend Titian's amber and Paul Veronese's silver with the golden varnish of Rembrandt, make the sun shine through a topaz, and yet you will not obtain the marvelous tint of her wonderful hair, which seemed to give out light instead of receiving it, and which would have merited more than did Berenice's to shine, a new constellation, among the ancient planets! Two women were dividing, smoothing, and rolling it in coils carefully arranged that the contact with the pillow should not rumple it.

During this delicate operation the countess balanced on the end of her foot a Turkish slipper of white velvet embroidered with gold, small enough to create jealousy in the hearts of the Sultan's khanouns and odalisques. Now and then, throwing back the silky folds of the burnous, she uncovered her white arm, and with a gently impatient motion pushed aside some stray lock of hair.

Reclining in this indolent posture she recalled the graceful figures in the Greek toilet scenes which decorate antique vases, and of which no artist has since been able to reproduce the pure and correct outlines or the youthful and slender beauty. She was a thousand times more seductive than in the garden of the Villa Salviati at Florence, and had Octave not been already wildly in love with her he would then have infallibly become so; but happily. nothing can be added to the infinite.

At the sight of her Octave-Labinski acted as if he had seen the most terrible spectacle; his knees knocked together and almost gave way under him. His mouth grew parched. Distress seized him at the throat like the hand of a Thug, and flames danced before his eyes. Her loveliness magnetized him.

Reflecting, however, that this stupid and bewildered manner fit for a repulsed lover was perfectly ridiculous in a husband, no matter how much in love he might still be with his wife, he made a courageous effort, and stepped firmly enough towards the countess.

"Ah! it is you, Olaf! How late you are this evening!" said the countess without turning, for her head was held by the long braids which the maids were twisting. Freeing it from the folds of the burnous, she offered him one of her beautiful hands. Octave-Labinski grasped her soft, flower-like hand, carried it to his lips, and pressed it with a long, burning kiss,—his whole soul concentrating itself on the little spot.

It is impossible to know what sensitiveness of the epidermis, what instinct of divine modesty, what unconscious intuition of the heart warned the countess; but a crimson flush spread swiftly over her face. Her throat and her arms took on the hue of the snow on the mountain-tops at the sun's earliest kiss. She started, and, half angry, half ashamed, slowly withdrew her hand. Octave's lips had given her the impression of a hot iron. She quickly recovered herself, however, and smiled at her childishness.

"You do not answer me, dear Olaf. Do you know that it is over sir hours since I saw you? You neglect me," she added, in a reproachful tone; "formerly you would not have deserted me so for a whole long evening. Did you even think of me?"

"All the time," replied Octave-Labinski.

"Oh, no, not all the time. I know when you think of me even at a distance. This evening, for instance, I was alone, seated at the piano, playing a piece of Weber's to soothe my dullness with music; in the sonorous pulsations of the notes your spirit hovered about me for several minutes; but at the last chord it flew away I know not whither, and did not return. Do not contradict me, I am sure of what I say."

Prascovie in fact was not mistaken. It was the moment when Count Olaf Labinski, at Dr. Cherbonneau's, had leaned over the magical glass of water evoking with all force of a fixed idea an adored image. From that instant, submerged in the fathomless ocean of a magnetic slumber, the count had been without thought, feeling, or volition.

Having finished the countess' toilet the maids withdrew. Octave-Labinski remained standing, gazing at Prascovie with a look of passion.

Constrained and oppressed by his expression, the countess wrapped herself in her burnous like Polymnia in her draperies. Only her head appeared above the blue-and-white folds, uneasy but charming.

No human penetration could divine the mysterious displacement of souls performed by Dr. Cherbonneau by means of the Sannyâsi Brahma-Logum formula; still Prascovie did not recognize in the eyes of Octave-Labinski her husband's usual expression, that look of love, chaste, calm, equal, eternal as the love of angels. This look was kindled by an earthly passion which troubled her and made her blush. She did not understand what it was, but she knew something had happened. A thousand wild suppositions crossed her mind. Was she no longer for Olaf anything but a common woman, desired for her beauty like a courtesan? Had the sublime accord of their souls been broken by some dissonance of which she was ignorant? Did Olaf love another, or had the corruptions of Paris sullied the purity of his heart? She asked herself these questions rapidly without being able to answer them in a satisfactory manner, and she told herself she was foolish, but still she felt afraid. A secret terror invaded her as though she were in the presence of some danger, unknown, but divined by that second sight of the mind which it is always wrong to disobey.

Nervous and agitated, she arose and went towards the door of the bedroom. The pseudo-count accompanied her as Othello leads away Desdemona at each exit in Shakespeare's play, with one arm around her waist; but when she was on the threshold she turned white and cold as a statue, stopped a second, gave a timorous glance at the young man, then entered, closed the door quickly, and shot the bolt.

"Octave's look!" she cried, and sank fainting on a sofa. As her senses came back she said to herself: "But how is it that this look which I have never forgotten shines tonight in Olaf's eyes? Why have I seen its gloomy and despairing flame sparkle in the pupils of my husband? Is Octave dead? Is it his soul which gleamed before me an instant to bid me farewell on leaving this world? Olaf! Olaf! If I was mistaken, if I foolishly yielded to empty fears, you will forgive me; but if I had welcomed you tonight I should have thought I was giving myself to another."

The countess assured herself that the door was well bolted, lighted a pendent lamp, and with a sensation of indefinable anguish like a timid child she hid herself in the bed. Towards morning she fell asleep; but strange and incoherent dreams tormented her restless slumber. Ardent eyes—Octave's eyes—stared at her from a mist, and darted at her forks of fire; while at the foot of her bed crouched a black and wrinkled figure, muttering syllables in an unknown tongue. Count Olaf also appeared in this absurd dream, but clothed in a form which was not his own.

We will not attempt to portray Octave's disappointment when he found himself facing a closed door and heard the bolt grating inside. His supreme hope had failed. He had had recourse to strange and terrible methods; he had surrendered himself to a magician, perhaps a demon, risking his life in this world, and his soul in the next, to conquer a woman who escaped him, though rendered defenseless by the sorcery of India. Repulsed as a lover, he was not more fortunate as a husband; Prascovie's invincible purity thwarted the most infernal plots. On the door-sill of the bedchamber she had seemed to him like one of Swedenborg's white angels anathematizing the Evil Spirit.

He could not stay all night in this ridiculous position, so he looked for the count's apartment. At the end of a suite of rooms he found one which contained an ebony columned bed with tapestry curtains, where amid the scrolls and flowers was embroidered a coat-of-arms. The panoplies of Oriental armor, knights' cuirasses and helmets, touched by the reflection of a lamp, threw vague glimmers into the shadow. Bohemian leather stamped with gold gleamed on the walls. Three or four huge carved arm-chairs and a heavy cabinet loaded with ornaments completed this mediæval furniture, which would not have been out of place in the great hall of a Gothic manor. On the count's part this was not a frivolous imitation of the fashion, but a hallowed memory. The room exactly reproduced the one he had inhabited at his mother's, and though often laughed at about it,—this fifth-act scenery,—he had always refused to change its style.

Octave-Labinski, exhausted with fatigue and emotion, flung himself on the bed and fell asleep, cursing Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau.

Fortunately, the morning brought with it serener thoughts; he promised himself to act hereafter in a more moderate fashion, to dull his glances, and to assume the manners of a husband. Aided by the count's valet, he dressed himself in a plain and simple costume, and went quietly down to the dining-room to breakfast with the countess.

Chapter X

MARBLE MASKS

Octave-Labinski walked in the footsteps of the valet, for in this house of which he was the apparent master he did not know where the dining-room was. It was a vast room on the ground floor, opening on the court, and in its noble and severe style recalled both an abbey and a manor. Dark oak wainscoting, arranged in symmetrical designs, reached to the ceiling, where plaster moulded in relief formed hexagonal panels painted blue and delicately arabesqued in gold. On the long panels of the wood-work Philippe Rousseau had painted the four seasons symbolically, not in mythological figures, but by trophies of still-life composed of the fruits appropriate to each season of the year. Game by Jadin corresponded to the fruits of Rousseau, and above each painting gleamed like the disk of a shield an immense plate by Bernard Palissy or Léonard de Limoges, of Japanese porcelain, Majolica or Arabian pottery, the glaze opalescent with all the colors of the prism. Stags' antlers and aurochs' horns alternated with the faience, and at each end of the room rose a large sideboard, as high as the altar-pieces in Spanish churches, of elaborate architecture and carved decoration, and rivaling the most beautiful works of Berruguete, Cornejo Duque, and Verbruggen. On their shelves glittered in confusion the antique silver of the Labinski family. Pitchers with fantastic handles, salt-cellars of ancient shape, large bowls, drinking cups, centre pieces shaped by the quaint German fancy, all worthy of a place amid the treasures of the Dresden Green Vault. Opposite the antique plate shone the marvelous products of modern silverware. The masterpieces of Wagner, Duponchel, Rudolphi, and Froment-Meurice; enameled tea-sets with figures by Feuchère and Vechte; chased salvers, champagne coolers with vine-leaved handles, and bacchanals in bas-relief, chafing-dishes as graceful as the Pompeian tripods, not to mention the Bohemian crystal, the Venetian glass, and the services in old Saxe and old Sèvres.

Oak chairs covered with green morocco were ranged along the walls, and over a table of which the feet were carved like eagle's claws there fell a clear, equal light through the ground white glass set in the centre panel of the ceiling. A transparent wreath of wine-leaves framed this milky square with green foliage. On the table, set in Russian fashion, the fruit was already placed, surrounded by a garland of violets; and under silver covers that were polished like emirs' helmets, the viands awaited the knife and fork. A Moscow samovar hissed forth a jet of steam; and two footmen in knee-breeches and white cravats stood silent and immovable behind the two arm-chairs, facing each other like domestic statues.

Octave, in order not to be involuntarily preoccupied by the novelty of objects with which he ought to have been familiar, took in all these things at a glance.

A rustle on the marble slabs, a murmur of silk, made him turn his head. It was the Countess Prascovie Labinska who approached and seated herself, after making him an amicable little gesture. She wore a morning gown of pale green and white plaid silk trimmed with a pinked rouching of the same material. Her hair lay in thick waves on her temples, and was gathered at the nape of her neck in a golden coil resembling the scroll of an Ionian pillar, a style as simple as it was dignified, and which a Greek sculptor could not have wished to change. Her rose-tinted cheeks were delicately blanched by the evening's emotion and the agitated sleep of the night. An imperceptible aureole of shadow encircled her eyes, usually so clear and calm. She had a weary, languid air; but thus softened, her beauty was only the more penetrating; it acquired a human touch, the goddess became a woman, the angel, folding her wings, ceased to soar.

Octave, grown prudent, veiled the flame in his eyes with a look of indifference.

The countess, with a slight motion of the shoulders as if chilled by a remnant of fever, stretched out her small bronze-slippered foot to the silky wool of a rug that had been placed under the table to neutralize the cold contact of the mosaic of white and Veronese variegated marble which paved the dining-room. Fixing her blue eyes on her companion, whom she took for her husband, for with the daylight had vanished the presentiments, the fears, and the phantoms of the night, she spoke a sentence in Polish in a tender, melodious voice, rich with chaste caresses. In moments of affection and intimacy she often used the dear maternal language with the count, especially in the presence of French servants to whom this idiom was unfamiliar.

The Parisian Octave was well up in Latin, Italian, Spanish, and knew a few words of English; but, like all Gallo-Romans, he was entirely ignorant of the Slavic tongues. The bristling bastion of consonants which protects the rare vowels in Polish would have inhibited his access even had he wished to approach it. In Florence the countess had always spoken to him in French or Italian, and the idea of learning the language in which Mickiewicz has almost equaled Byron had not occurred to him. It is impossible to think of everything.

On hearing this phrase, there took place in the count's brain, inhabited by the mind of Octave, a very singular phenomenon. The sounds, so strange to the Parisian, following the folds of a Slav ear reached the usual place where Olaf's mind received and transferred them into thoughts, and evoked there a sort of physical remembrance. Octave had a confused idea of their meaning; words hidden in the cerebral circumvolutions, in the secret recesses of memory, arose buzzing, ready to reply; but these vague reminiscences, failing to communicate with the mind, soon dispersed, and all was again a blank. The poor lover's embarrassment was dreadful; in taking the form of Count Olaf Labinski, he had not dreamed of this complication, and he realized that in seizing his position he had exposed himself to severe disasters.

Astonished at Octave's silence, and fancying that through some momentary abstraction he had not heard her, Prascovie repeated her remark slowly and in a louder tone.

If he heard more plainly the sound of the words, the pseudo-count understood their signification none the better. He made desperate efforts to guess what it might be about, but for those who do not know them the dense languages of the North have no transparency, and if a Frenchman can surmise what an Italian says, he is deaf when listening to a Pole. In spite of himself, a violent blush covered his cheeks, he bit his lips, and to keep himself in countenance hacked furiously at the meat on his plate.

"One would certainly suppose, my sweet prince," said the countess this time in French, "that you do not hear, or that you do not understand me."

"Really," faltered Octave-Labinski, hardly knowing what he said, "that terrible language is so difficult!"

"Difficult! Yes! perhaps it is for strangers; but for those who have stammered it at their mother's knee it springs from the lips like the breath of life, and with the unconsciousness of thought."

"Yes, doubtless; but there are times when it seems to me as if I no longer know it."

"What are you saying, Olaf? What! you have forgotten the language of your ancestors, the language of the Fatherland, the language which enables you to recognize your brothers among men, and," added she in a lower voice, "the language in which you first told me you loved me!"

"The habit of using another tongue" . . . ventured Octave-Labinski, at the end of his arguments.

"Olaf," answered the countess reproachfully, "I see that Paris has spoiled you; I was right in not wishing to come here. Who could have told me that when the noble Count Labinski returned to his domains he would no longer know how to reply to the felicitations of his vassals?"

Prascovie's charming countenance assumed a doleful expression; for the first time sadness cast its shadow on her angelically smooth brow. This strange forgetfulness wounded her inmost soul, and seemed almost treasonable.

The rest of the breakfast passed in silence. Prascovie frowned on the man whom she thought the count. Octave was in torment, for he dreaded other questions which he would be compelled to leave unanswered. At last the countess rose and returned to her rooms.

Left alone, Octave played with the handle of a knife which he was tempted to thrust in his heart, for his situation was unbearable. He had counted on a surprise, and now he found himself involved in the to him issueless labyrinths of an unknown existence. In assuming the body of Count Olaf Labinski he should also have taken from him his previous ideas, the languages he knew, his childhood's memories, the thousand intimate details which compose a man's self, the links binding his existence to the existences of others. But for that, all Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau's knowledge would not have sufficed. What a fate! actually to be in this paradise whose threshold he had hardly dared glance at from afar, to live under the same roof with Prascovie, see her, speak to her, kiss her hand with the very lips of her husband, and yet be unable to deceive her divine modesty, and to betray himself every instant by some inexplicable stupidity! "It was written above that Prascovie would never love me! And yet I have made the greatest sacrifice to which mortal pride can descend; I have renounced my *self*, I have consented to profit under a strange form by caresses destined for another!"

At this point in his monologue a groom bowed before him and asked, with every sign of the deepest respect, what horse he would ride. Seeing that the count did not answer, the man, much frightened at his own boldness, risked murmuring,—

"Vultur or Rustem? they have not been out for a week."

"Rustem," replied Octave-Labinski, as he would have said Vultur had not the last name clung to his distraught mind.

He dressed for riding and started for the Bois de Boulogne, wishing to give his shaken nerves a bath of fresh air.

Rustem, a magnificent animal of the Nedji race, that carried on his breast, in an Oriental bag of gold-embroidered velvet, titles to a nobility extending back to the first years of the hegira, did not need to be roused. He seemed to understand his rider's thoughts, and as soon as he had left the pavements and struck the bridle-paths he started off, fleet as an arrow, before Octave had touched him with the spur. After two hours of hard riding the horseman and his beast returned to the hotel, the one quite calm, and the other fuming, with scarlet nostrils.

The pseudo-count joined the countess, whom he found in her drawing-room, dressed in a gown of white silk flounced to the waist, a knot of ribbon in her hair.

It was Thursday, the day on which she remained at home and received her visitors.

"Well," she said to him, with a gracious smile, for her beautiful lips could not pout for long, "have you regained your memory galloping in the alleys of the Bois?"

"No, my dear," replied Octave-Labinski, "but I have a confession to make."

"Do I not know in advance all your thoughts? Are we no longer transparent to each other?"

"Yesterday I went to see the physician who is so much talked about."

"Yes, Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau, who made a long stay in India, and has, they say, learned from the Brahmans a lot of secrets, each more marvelous than the other. You even wished to take me, but I am not curious; for I know you love me, and that knowledge is all I require."

"He made such singular experiments before me, he produced such miraculous effects, that my mind is still disturbed by them. This eccentric fellow, who has an irresistible power at his disposal, threw me into a magnetic sleep so profound that on awakening I no longer had the same faculties. I had lost the remembrance of many things. The past floated in a mist of obscurity; my love for you alone remained intact."

"You were wrong, Olaf, to put yourself under the influence of this physician. God, who has created the soul, has the right to touch it," said the countess in a grave tone; "but man in attempting to do so commits an impious action. I hope that you will not go back there, and I hope, too, that when I say something agreeable to you—in Polish—you will understand me as you once did."

During his ride Octave had conceived this excuse of magnetism to palliate the errors which he could not fail to make in his new life. But his troubles were not ended. A servant opening the door announced a visitor.

"M. Octave de Saville."

Though he might have expected this meeting one day or another, at these simple words the real Octave trembled as if the trumpet of the last judgment had suddenly sounded in his ear. He had need to call up all his courage, and to tell himself that he had the best of the situation, to prevent himself from reeling. Instinctively he clutched the back of a chair, and thus managed to stand apparently firm and tranquil.

Count Olaf, clothed in the form of Octave, advanced towards the countess with a deep bow.

"The Count Labinski . . . M. Octave de Saville," said the countess, presenting the gentlemen.

The two men bowed coldly, and over the marble mask of worldly politeness which sometimes covers such evil passions shot savage glances at each other.

"You have grown formal since Florence days, Monsieur Octave," said the countess in a familiar and friendly tone, "and I was afraid I should leave Paris without seeing you. You were more assiduous at the Villa Salviati, and you were numbered among the faithful."

"Madam," the pseudo-Octave answered constrainedly, "I have traveled, I have been ailing, ill even, and on receiving your gracious invitation I asked myself whether I should profit by it, for one must not be an egotist and abuse the indulgence that people are good enough to have for a bore."

"Bored perhaps, but never a bore," replied the countess. "You have always been melancholy; yet does not one of your poets say of melancholy, 'After idleness, 't is the best of ills'?"

"It is a report which happy people spread to dispense themselves from pitying those who suffer," said Olaf-de Saville.

As if to beg his pardon for the love with which she had involuntarily inspired him, the countess cast a look of ineffable sweetness on the count, shut up in Octave's body.

"You think me more frivolous than I am; all real pain has my pity, and if I cannot relieve, I can at least commiserate. I would like to have had you happy, dear Monsieur Octave; but why have you immured yourself in sadness, why have you refused the life which came to you with its joys, its seductions, and its duties? Why have you refused my proffered friendship?"

These simple and sincere phrases impressed the two listeners differently. Octave heard in them the confirmation of the judgment pronounced in the Salviati garden by this perfect mouth unsoiled by lies; and Olaf, a proof of his wife's unalterable virtue, which nothing but diabolical cunning could overcome. And a sudden madness seized him on seeing his spectre animated by another soul installed in his own house. He sprang at the throat of the false count.

"Thief, brigand, rogue, give me back my body!"

At this most extraordinary action the countess rushed to the bell and the footmen carried out the count.

"That poor Octave has gone crazy!" said Prascovie while Olaf, struggling vainly, was being taken away.

"Yes," answered the real Octave, "crazy with love! Countess, you are decidedly too beautiful!"

Chapter XI

A PREY

Two hours after this scene the false count received from the real one a letter bearing the seal of Octave de Saville,—the unhappy dispossessed Olaf had no other at his disposal. It produced an odd effect on the usurper of Count Labinski's body to open a missive sealed with his own crest, but everything had to be peculiar in this abnormal position.

The letter contained the following lines, traced by a stiff hand, in a writing which looked like counterfeit, for Olaf was not accustomed to holding a pen with Octave's fingers:—

Read by another than yourself, this letter would appear to be dated from a lunatic asylum, but you will understand it. An inexplicable combination of circumstances never before produced, perhaps, since the earth has turned about the sun forces me to act as no man has ever done. I write to myself and put on the address a name which is my own, a name which with my person you have stolen from me. I am ignorant of the plot of which I am the victim and of the circle of infernal illusions into which I have put my foot. You, of course, know all about it.

"If you are not a coward, the mouth of my pistol or the point of my sword will demand of you this secret on a ground where every man, honorable or infamous, answers the questions put to him. To-morrow one of us must have ceased to see the light of day. The universe is now too narrow for us both. I will kill my body filled with your lying spirit, or you will kill yours, wherein my soul rages at being imprisoned.

"Do not try to prove me crazy. I shall have the strength to be reasonable, and everywhere I meet you I will insult you with the politeness of a gentleman and the coolness of a diplomat. The Count Olaf Labinski's mustache may displease M. Octave de Saville, and, every day, feet are trodden on at the exit of the Opéra. I trust that my words, though obscure, will have no ambiguity for you, and that my seconds will come to a perfect understanding with yours as to the hour, the place, and the conditions of the duel."

This letter threw Octave into a quandary. He could not refuse the count's challenge, and yet it went against him to fight with himself, for he had kept a sort of tenderness for his old envelope. The idea of being forced into this duel by some open insult made him decide to accept it, though if necessary he could have put his adversary into a lunatic's strait-jacket and thus stayed his arm; but his delicacy revolted at such a method. If carried along by an overpowering passion he had committed a reprehensible action and hidden the lover under the disguise of the husband to triumph over a virtue above all seduction, he was still a man not without honor and courage. Besides, he had not taken this extreme step until, after three years of struggle and suffering; the moment had arrived when his life, consumed by love, was escaping him. He did not know the count; he was not his friend, he owed him nothing, and he had profited by the hazardous means which Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau had offered to him.

Where find seconds? Of course among the count's friends; but Octave in the one day he had lived in the house had had no chance to meet them.

On the mantelpiece were two vases of china with gold dragons for handles. One held rings, pins, seals, and other trifling jewels,—the other, visiting cards, on which, under the coronet of duke, marquis, or count, were inscribed by skilled engravers in Gothic, round, or English type a multitude of names, Polish, Russian, Hungarian, German, Italian, Spanish, and attesting the roving existence of the count, who had friends in every land.

Octave took two hap-hazard: Count Zamoieczki and the Marquis de Sepulveda. He ordered the carriage, and drove to their addresses. He found them both in. They did not appear surprised at the request of the man whom they thought Count Olaf Labinski. Totally devoid of the sensitiveness of middle-class seconds, they did not ask if the affair could be compromised, and like the perfect gentlemen they were maintained a silence full of good taste as to the motive of the quarrel.

On his side, the real count, or, if you like it better, the pseudo-Octave, was a prey to a similar embarrassment. He remembered Alfred Humbert and Gustave Raimbaud, whose breakfast he had refused to attend, and he requested them to help him in this encounter. The two young men showed considerable surprise at finding their friend involved in a duel, for he had hardly left his room in a year, and they knew his character was more pacific than quarrelsome. But when he had told them that it was a mortal combat, they made no further objections, and went to the Hotel Labinski.

The conditions were soon arranged. The adversaries having declared that sword or pistol suited them equally well, a gold coin thrown in the air decided the weapon. They were to meet in the Avenue des Poteaux of the Bois de Boulogne, near the rustic thatched summer-house, where the fine gravel offers a favorable arena for this sort of combat.

When all was settled it was nearly midnight, and Octave went to the door of Prascovie's apartment. As on the previous evening it was bolted, and the countess' mocking voice flung this sarcasm at him through the door,—

"Come back when you know Polish; I am too patriotic to receive a foreigner."

Notified by Octave, Dr. Cherbonneau came in the morning, carrying a case of surgical instruments and a roll of bandages. They entered a carriage together, MM. Zamoieczki and de Sepulveda following in their coupé.

"Well, my dear Octave," said the physician; "so the adventure is already turning into tragedy? I ought to have let the count sleep in your body on my divan for a week. I have prolonged magnetic slumbers beyond that limit. But even when one has learned wisdom from the Brahmans, the Pandit, and the Sanniasys of India, one always forgets something, and imperfections are found in the best combined plans. But how did Countess Prascovie welcome her Florence lover thus disguised?"

"I think," replied Octave, "that either she recognized me notwithstanding my metamorphosis, or else her guardian angel whispered in her ear to distrust me. I found her as chaste, as cold, as pure, as polar snow. Doubtless her exquisite nature divined a stranger under the beloved form of her husband. I told you truly that you could do nothing for me; indeed I am even more unhappy than when you paid me your first visit."

"Who can fix a boundary to the soul's power," said Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau thoughtfully, "especially when it is weakened by no earthly preoccupation, soiled by no human tie, and keeps itself in the glow and contemplation of love just as it left the Creator's hands? Yes, you are right; she recognized you, her heavenly modesty shrank at the look of desire, and instinctively veiled itself with its white wings. I pity you, my poor Octave! Your wound is indeed immedicable. Were we in the Middle Ages, I should say, Get thee to a monastery."

"I have often thought of it," replied Octave.

Presently they reached the meeting ground. The counterfeit Octave's brougham was already at the place designated.

At this early hour the Bois presented a really picturesque aspect, which later in the day fashion makes it lose. Summer was at that stage when the sun has not yet had time to darken the green of the foliage; fresh, translucent tints, washed by the night's dew, variegated the forest, and gave out an odor of tender vegetation. At this spot the trees are particularly fine; perhaps because they have encountered a more favorable soil, or because they are the only survivors of some old plantation. Their vigorous trunks, stained with moss or glossed with a silvery bark, clutch the earth with gnarled roots, and project oddly bent branches. They might have served as models for the studies of artists and decorators who go much farther to seek less remarkable ones. A few birds, which later the day's noises silence, chirped gayly in the leafy retreat; a timid rabbit crossed the gravel of the alley in three bounds and ran to hide in the grass, frightened at the sounds of the wheels.

These poems of nature surprised in undress occupied the two adversaries and their seconds very little, as you can imagine. The sight of Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau made a disagreeable impression on Count Olaf Labinski, but he recovered himself quickly.

The swords were measured, their places assigned to the combatants, who after taking off their coats fell into position.

"Ready!" the seconds cried.

In every duel, no matter what the fury of the adversaries may be, there is a moment of solemn immobility: each combatant silently studies his enemy and makes his plan, reflecting on the attack and preparing to parry and thrust. Then the swords seek, provoke, and feel each other, so to speak, without separating; that lasts several seconds, which seem minutes, hours, to the anxiety of the assistants.

The conditions of this duel, apparently commonplace to the spectators, were so abnormal for the combatants that they remained thus on guard longer than is customary. Each had in front of him his own body, and must drive the steel into flesh which had belonged to himself two days before.

The fight was complicated by a sort of unforeseen suicide, and, though both were brave, yet Octave and the count felt an instinctive horror at standing, sword in hand, face to face with their own phantoms, and ready to fall on themselves. The impatient seconds were about to cry again, "Gentlemen, are you ready!" when at last the blades crossed.

Several attacks were parried with agility on each side.

Thanks to his military education, the count was a skillful fencer; he had pinked the plastron of the most famous masters. But if he still had the method he no longer possessed the muscular arm which had routed the Mourides of Schamyl; it was Octave's weak wrist which wielded his sword.

Octave on the contrary felt, in the count's body, an unaccustomed strength, and though less expert, he always parried the steel which sought his breast.

It was in vain that Olaf strove to touch his adversary and risked thrusts which exposed himself. Octave, cooler and more steady, baffled every feint.

The count began to get excited, and his play grew nervous and uneven. Though he would then have to remain Octave de Saville, he wanted to kill this deceptive body which might even deceive Prascovie—a thought which lashed him into an inexpressible rage.

At the risk of being run through, he tried a straight thrust to reach, through his own body, the life and heart of his rival; but Octave's sword wound round his with such a quick, sharp, irresistible movement that the steel was wrenched from his hand, and springing in the air fell several steps away.

Olaf's life was at Octave's disposal; he had only to thrust and run him through.

The count's face quivered; not that he feared death, but he thought that he was about to leave his wife to this body-thief whom nothing hereafter could unmask.

Far from profiting by his advantage, Octave threw down his sword, and motioning to the seconds not to interfere walked towards the stupefied count, whom he took by the arm and dragged into the depth of the wood.

"What do you want with me?" said the count. "Why not kill me when you have the chance? Why not continue the duel after letting me recover my sword if it revolts you to strike an unarmed man? You know that the sun should not cast the shadows of both of us on the ground, and that the earth must receive one or the other."

"Listen to me patiently," replied Octave. "Your happiness is in my hands. I can keep forever this body in which I dwell to-day and which in legitimate propriety belongs to you. It suits me to acknowledge this now that there are no witnesses near us, and only the wild birds, who never repeat, can hear. Count Olaf Labinski, whom I represent as well as I can, is a better fencer than Octave de Saville, whose form you now have, and which I, much to my regret, would be obliged to suppress. This death, though not real, as my soul would survive, would desolate my mother."

Recognizing the truth of these remarks, the count maintained an acquiescent silence.

"If I should oppose it," continued Octave, "you would never succeed in reintegrating your identity; you see in what your two attempts ended. Other trials would stamp you as a monomaniac. No one would believe a word of your allegations, and, as you have already been able to convince yourself, when you pretended to be Count Olaf Labinski every one would laugh in your face. You would be shut up, and you would pass the rest of your life protesting under the shower-bath that you were actually the husband of the beautiful Countess Prascovie Labinska. Compassionate souls would say on hearing you: Poor Octave! And you would be disowned like Balzac's Chabert who wished to prove he was not dead."

This was all so mathematically true that the discouraged count let his head fall on his breast.

"As you are at present Octave de Saville you have doubtless searched his desk and rummaged among his papers, and you are not ignorant that for three years he has nourished for the Countess Prascovie Labinska a desperate, hopeless love, which he has tried in vain to tear from his heart, and which will only leave him with his life, unless it follows him to the tomb."

"Yes, I know it," said the count, biting his lip.

"Well, to reach her I have employed terrible means, on which a delirious passion alone would venture. Dr. Cherbonneau has attempted for me a task that would startle the thaumaturgists of the universe. After putting us both to sleep he changed the envelopes of our souls. But in vain! I will return you your body: Prascovie does not love me! Under the husband's form she recognized the lover's soul; her look was the same on the threshold of the conjugal apartment as in the garden of the Villa Salviati."

Octave's tone betrayed such true sorrow that the count had faith in his words.

"I am a lover," added Octave, smiling, "and not a thief, and as the only thing which I desired in this world cannot belong to me, I do not see why should keep your titles, castles, lands, money, horses, and weapons. There, give me your arm; let up appear reconciled, thank our seconds, take with us Dr. Cherbonneau, and return to the magical laboratory from which we came forth transformed. The old Brahman will know how to undo his work."

"Gentlemen," said Octave, sustaining for a little longer the part of Count Olaf Labinski, "my adversary and I have exchanged confidential explications which render the continuation of the duel useless. There is nothing like crossing swords a bit to clear the minds of sensible people."

MM. Zamoieczki and de Sepulveda reentered their carriage, and Alfred Humbert and Gustave Raimbaud regained theirs, while Count Olaf Labinski, Octave de Saville, and Dr. Cherbonneau drove at full speed towards the Rue du Regard.

Chapter XII

A NEWSPAPER ITEM

During the transit from the Bois de Boulogne to the Rue du Regard, Octave de Saville said to Dr. Cherbonneau,—

"My dear doctor, I am about to test your science once more; you must restore our souls, each to its customary habitation. That should not be difficult for you. I hope that Count Labinski will not be angry at you for having made him change a palace for a hovel, and lodging his illustrious personality for some hours in my poor individuality. But, then, you possess a power which fears nothing."

With an acquiescent gesture Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau replied: "The operation will be much simpler this time; the imperceptible filaments which hold the soul to the body have with you been recently broken, and have not had time to be renewed, and your minds will not form that obstacle which the instinctive resistance of the magnetized opposes to the magnetizer. The count will doubtless pardon an old erudite like myself for not having been able to resist the pleasure of putting in practice an experiment for which one finds but few subjects, and particularly as this attempt has only served to brilliantly confirm a virtue which carries delicacy to divination and triumphs where every other would have succumbed. If you wish, you can look on this momentary transformation as a strange dream, and perhaps, later, you will not be sorry to have experienced the odd sensation, which few men have known, of having inhabited two bodies. Metempsychosis is not a new doctrine; but before transmigrating into another existence the soul drinks the cup of forgetfulness, and every one cannot, like Pythagoras, remember to have assisted at the Trojan war."

"The benefit of being reinstalled in my own individuality," the count answered politely, "equals the unpleasantness of having been expropriated from it; this is said without ill-feeling for M. Octave de Saville, whom I still am, and whom I am about to cease to be."

Octave smiled with the lips of Count Labinski at this sentence which could only reach him through another's envelope, and silence established itself between these three persons whose abnormal situation rendered all conversation difficult.

The unfortunate Octave thought of

his vanished hope, and his reflections were not, it must be owned, precisely rose-color. Like all repulsed lovers, he still asked himself why he was not loved—as if love had a why! The only reason one can give it is the *because*, a reply logical in its obstinate laconism, and which women oppose to all embarrassing questions. Nevertheless, he recognized his defeat, and felt that the spring of life, which for an instant Dr. Cherbonneau had renovated for him, was newly broken, and rattled in his heart like that of a watch dropped on the ground. Octave would not have caused his mother the sorrow of his suicide; and he sought a spot wherein he might extinguish his unknown grief quietly under the scientific name of a plausible illness. Had he been an artist, poet, or musician, he would have crystallized his pain in masterpieces; and Prascovie, robed in white, crowned with stars, like Dante's Beatrice, would have hovered about his inspiration like an angel of light; but, as has been intimated at the beginning of this story, though well instructed and gifted, Octave was not one of those chosen spirits who imprint on this earth the trace of their passage. In his obscure sublimity he only knew how to love and die.

The carriage entered the court of the old hotel in the Rue du Regard, a court whose pavement was set in green grass through which the visitors' steps had worn a path, and which the high gray walls of the building inundated with shadow, like that which falls from a cloister's arcades; Silence and Immobility, like invisible statues, watched on the threshold protecting the meditations of the erudite.

When Octave and the count had alighted, the physician jumped from the carriage with a lighter step than one would have expected from his age, without even leaning on the arm which the footman offered to him with that politeness which servants of large establishments affect towards old or feeble persons.

As soon as the double doors had closed on them, Olaf and Octave felt themselves wrapped in the hot atmosphere which recalled to the physician that of India, and in which only he could breathe at his ease, but which almost suffocated those who had not, like him, been for thirty years torrified in tropical suns. The incarnations of Vishnu still leered in their frames, weirder by day than by lamplight; Shiva, the blue god, sneered on his pedestal; and Dourga, biting his callous lip with his wild boar's tusks, seemed to agitate his chaplet of skulls. The apartment retained its magical and mysterious appearance. Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau led his two subjects to the room where the first transformation had taken place. He turned the glass disk of the electric machine, shook the iron rods of the mesmeric battery, opened the hot-air registers to make the temperature rise rapidly, read two or three lines from parchments so ancient that they resembled old bark ready to crumble into dust, and, when several minutes had elapsed, said to Octave and the count,—

"Gentlemen, I am at your service; shall we begin?"

While the physician was making these preparations, disquieting reflections passed through the count's mind.

"When I am asleep, what is this old lugubrious-faced magician, who might be the devil himself, going to do with my soul? Will he restore it to my body, or will he carry it off to hell with him? Is not this exchange, which ought to give me back my happiness, a Machiavellian combination for some sorcery whose end escapes me? Still, my position could not be worse. Octave possesses my body, and, as he wisely remarked this morning, in reclaiming it with my present figure I should cause myself to be shut up as a lunatic. If he wished to put me definitely out of his way, he had only to drive in the point of his sword; I was disarmed, at his mercy; the justice of man could have said nothing against it; the form of the duel was perfectly regular, and it would have been done all in order. I must think of Prascovie and have no childish fears. Let me try the only way which is left me to regain her!"

And, like Octave, he grasped the rod which Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau presented to him.

Overpowered by the metal conductors, charged to the utmost with electric fluid, the two young men sank into an unconsciousness so profound that to any one unprepared for it it would have resembled death. The physician made the passes, performed the rites, pronounced the syllables as on the first occasion, and soon two luminous stars appeared above Octave and the count. The physician led to its original abode Count Olaf Labinski's soul, which followed the electrician's gesture with an eager flight.

During this time Octave's soul moved slowly from Olaf's body, and instead of rejoining its own, rose, rose, as if glad to be free, and appeared indifferent to its prison. The physician was touched with pity for the fluttering, winged Psyche, and asked himself if it were a kindness to bring it back to this vale of misery. In this momentary hesitation the soul continued to ascend. Remembering his part, M. Cherbonneau repeated with the most imperious accent the irresistible monosyllable, and made a pass pregnant with volition, but the tiny quivering spark was already out of the circle of attraction, and swiftly traversing the upper pane of the window it disappeared.

The physician ceased making efforts which he knew to be useless, and awakened the count, who, seeing himself in a mirror with his usual features, gave a cry of joy, threw a glance at Octave's immobile body to make sure that he was thoroughly clear of that envelope, and with a nod of farewell to M. Balthazar Cherbonneau rushed away.

A few seconds later the muffled roll of a carriage under the arch was heard, and Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau was alone face to face with the corpse of Octave de Saville.

"By the trunk of Ganesa!" exclaimed the pupil of the Brahman of Elephanta when the count had gone, "this is a provoking affair. I opened the cage-door, the bird flew away, and now it is already beyond the sphere of this world, so far indeed that the Sannyâsi Brahma-Logum himself could not overtake it, and here am I with a corpse on my hands. It is true, I can dissolve it in a corrosive bath of such strength that not an appreciable atom will remain, or I can make of it in a few hours a beautiful mummy, like those inclosed in cases covered with variegated hieroglyphs; but inquiries will be started, my dwelling searched, my chests opened, myself subjected to all sorts of tiresome questions." . . .

Here a bright idea crossed the physician's mind; he seized a pen and wrote rapidly a few lines on a sheet of paper, which he put in the drawer of his table.

The paper contained these words:

"Having neither relatives nor connections, I bequeath all my belongings to M. Octave de Saville, for whom I have a particular affection, on condition that he pays a legacy of one hundred thousand francs to the Brahmanic hospital of Ceylon for old, worn-out, and sick animals; that he gives twelve hundred francs yearly for life to my Indian and to my English servant; and that he sends the manuscript of the laws of Manu to the Mazarin library."

This testament made to a dead man by a living one is not the strangest thing in this story, improbable yet true; but the singularity of it will be at once explained.

The physician felt Octave de Saville's body, from which the warmth of life had not yet departed, looked in the glass, with a singularly disdainful air, at his own wrinkled face, tanned and rough like a zebra's skin, and making over his head the motion with which one throws off an old coat when the tailor brings a new one, he muttered the formula of the Sannyâsi Brahma-Logum.

Immediately, Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau's body fell to the floor as if struck by a thunderbolt, and that of Octave de Saville rose up in full strength and activity.

Octave-Cherbonneau stood for some minutes before the thin, bony, and livid carcass, which, no longer upheld by the powerful spirit that had before animated it, at once took on a look of complete senility, and rapidly assumed a cadaverous appearance.

"Farewell, poor human remnant, miserable out-at-elbow garment, frayed at every seam, which for seventy years I have dragged about the five parts of the globe! You did me good service, and I do not leave you without regret. One gets accustomed to living so long together! but with this young envelope, which my science will soon make robust, I can study, work, and read still a few words more in the great book before Death, saying 'It is enough!' closes it at the most interesting paragraph!"

After this funeral oration, addressed to himself, Octave-Cherbonneau went forth with a tranquil step to take possession of his new existence.

Count Olaf Labinski had returned to his house and had immediately sent to ask if the countess could receive him.

He found her in the conservatory seated on a bank of moss amid a virgin forest of exotic and tropical plants. The half-raised panes of glass admitted the warm, bright air. She was reading Novalis, one of the most subtile, rarefied, and immaterial authors which German spiritualism has produced. The countess did not like books which paint existence in strong, real colors; and, from having lived in a world of elegance, love, and poetry, life appeared to her a trifle coarse.

She threw down her book and slowly lifted her eyes to the count. She feared to encounter again in her husband's dark pupils that ardent, stormy look, full of mysterious thoughts, which had troubled her so much, and which had seemed to her—foolish apprehension—the look of another!

In Olaf's eyes shone a serene joy, and a pure, chaste love burned in them with a steady fire; the stranger soul, which had so mysteriously changed the expression of his features, was gone forever. Prascovie at once recognized her adored Olaf, and a quick blush of pleasure colored her transparent cheeks. Though she was ignorant of the transformations performed by Dr. Cherbonneau, her delicate sensitiveness had unconsciously been aware of all these changes.

"What are you reading, dear Prascovie?" said Olaf, lifting from the moss the book bound in blue morocco. "Ah! the history of Henri d'Ofterdingen,—it is the same volume that I went full gallop to get you at Mohilev, one day when you had expressed a wish for it at dinner. At midnight it was on the table beside your lamp; but poor Ralph was broken-winded ever after!"

"And I told you that I would never again mention the least desire before you. You have the character of that Spanish noble who prayed his mistress not to gaze at the stars, since he could not give them to her."

"If you looked at one," replied the count, "I should try to climb to heaven and ask it of God."

While listening to her husband the countess smoothed a refractory mesh of her hair which scintillated like a flame in a ray of gold. The motion had disarranged her sleeve, and uncovered her beautiful arm encircled at the wrist by the turquoise-studded lizard which she wore on the day of her apparition in the Cascine so fatal to Octave.

"What a fright that poor little lizard once gave you!" said the count. "It was when you had, on my insistent prayer, descended to the garden for the first time, and I killed it with the stroke of a switch. I had it dipped in gold and decorated with a few stones; but even as a trinket it still appeared disagreeable to you, and it was some time before you could bring yourself to wear it."

"Oh, I am quite accustomed to it now, and it is my favorite ornament, for it recalls a very dear remembrance."

"Yes," replied the count, "on that day we agreed that on the morrow I should make your aunt an official request for your hand."

The countess recognized the look and tone of the real Olaf, and reassured also by these intimate details, she rose smiling, took his arm, and made several turns about the conservatory with him, plucking with free hand as she went some flowers whose petals she pulled off with her fresh lips, looking as she did so like that Venus of Schiavoni's who is feasting on roses.

"As you have such a good memory to-day," she said, flinging from her the flower she had been mutilating with her pearly teeth, "you ought to have recovered the use of your mother-tongue . . . which yesterday you no longer knew."

"If souls retain a human language in paradise," answered the count in Polish, "it is the one my soul will speak in heaven to tell you that I love you."

Prascovie, still moving, let her head fall gently on Olaf's shoulder.

"Dear heart," she murmured, "now you are as I love you to be. Yesterday you frightened me, and I fled as from a stranger."

The next day Octave de Saville, animated by the spirit of the old physician, received a black-edged letter which begged him to assist at the funeral service and burial of M. Balthazar Cherbonneau.

Clothed in his new aspect, the physician followed his former body to the cemetery, saw himself buried, listened with a well-assumed air of regret to the address pronounced over his grave, in which the irreparable loss to science was deplored, and then returned to the Rue Saint Lazare and awaited the opening of the will he had made in his own favor.

That day could be read among the items of the evening papers:

"Dr. Balthazar Cherbonneau, known by his long sojourn in India, his philological knowledge, and his marvelous cures, was yesterday found dead in his laboratory. A most thorough examination of the body has banished all idea of a crime. M. Cherbonneau probably succumbed to excessive mental fatigue, or perished in some audacious experiment. It is said that a will in the testator's own handwriting leaves to the Mazarin library some extremely valuable manuscripts, and names as heir a young man belonging to a distinguished family, M. O. de S."

Spirit Love

Chapter I

MALIVERT

Guy de Malivert was stretched out, half reclining, in a large, comfortable arm-chair before a brightly blazing fire. He had apparently determined to pass at home one of those quiet evenings which the fatigue caused by the whirl of social pleasures occasionally exacts of the fashionable youth of the day. His dress was a happy mixture of comfort and elegance: a smoking-jacket of black velvet, adorned with black silk frogs; a loose shirt of soft, thin silk; wide trousers of red flannel, and morocco slippers in which danced nervously his slender, arched foot. With his body free from all uncomfortable pressure, thoroughly at his ease in these soft, pliant garments, Guy de Malivert, who had partaken at home of a simple but perfectly cooked dinner, washed down by two or three glasses of rare old Burgundy which had made the voyage to India and back, experienced that sort of physical beatitude which is the result of the perfect accord of all the different members of the body. He was happy, although there was no particular reason for his being so.

Close beside him, a lamp, hung in a crescent of old sea-green crackel-ware, diffused a soft, whitish radiance from its opaque globe, like that of a moon partially veiled by a slight mist. The light fell upon a volume which he held carelessly in his hand, and which was no other than a copy of Longfellow's Evangeline.

Guy certainly admired the work of the greatest poet which the young country of America has yet produced, but he was in that lazy state of mind when the absence of all thought is preferable to the most beautiful of ideas expressed in the most sublime of phrases. He read a few lines, and then letting the book fall into his lap, he rested his head on the soft, fluffy covering of the arm-chair, and abandoned himself to the enjoyment of a complete inertia of mind and body. The warm air of the room seemed to gently caress him, and all his surroundings whispered of rest, comfort, silence, and peace. The only sounds that broke the stillness were the hissing of a gas-jet which had been turned up a trifle too high, and the ticking of the clock whose pendulum marked the flight of time with low, rhythmical voice.

It was the depth of winter; the snow, which had recently fallen, deadened the rumble of the few carriages which rolled through that deserted quarter, for Guy lived in one of the least frequented streets of the Faubourg Saint-Germain. Ten o'clock rang out, and the lazy fellow congratulated himself that he was not arrayed in a dress-coat and a white cravat, leaning against the wall of the ball-room at some embassy, and gazing, perforce, at the scrawny shoulder-blades of some old dowager disporting herself in a gown cut altogether too low. Although there reigned in the room the carefully regulated temperature of a conservatory, one realized that it was cold outside, were it only from the briskness with which the fire burned and the profound silence of the streets. The superb Angora, Malivert's companion on this evening devoted to *dolce far niente,* had drawn near the hearth to bask in the flames, which threw a red glow upon its white, silky fur, and the gilded fender alone prevented it from stretching itself out at full length amidst the ashes.

The room in which Guy de Malivert was tasting these peaceful, domestic delights was a combination of library and studio. It was a spacious, lofty apartment in the highest story of the pavilion which Guy inhabited, and which was situated between a broad court-yard and a garden planted with superb old trees, worthy of a royal forest, and found only in the aristocratic Fauborg; for to produce such trees time is an imperative necessity, and parvenus can not improvise them to give shade to their mansions built in a hurry, lest their newly filled purses may be depleted before they can take possession.

The walls of the room were hung with dun-colored leather, and the ceiling was composed of Norwegian fir, with heavy cross-beams of old oak. These dark, sober colors displayed to admirable advantage the paintings, water-colors, and etchings suspended on the walls of this species of museum where Malivert had arranged his collection of curious and fantastic objects of art. Oaken bookcases, low enough not to interfere with the pictures, lined all sides of the room, forming a sort of wainscoting, which was broken by only one door. The books with which the shelves were filled would have surprised anyone who examined them, on account of the wide divergence of their character; one would have said that the library of an artist and that of a savant had been mingled together. Side by side with the classic poets of all ages and all countries—Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Dante, Ariosto, Ronsard, Shakspere, Milton, Goethe, Schiller, Byron, Victor Hugo, Sainte-Beuve, Alfred de Musset, Edgar Poe—reposed the Symbolique of Creuzer, the Mécanique Céleste of Laplace, Arago's Astronomy, Burdach's Physiology, Humboldt's Cosmos, the works of Claude Bernard and of Berthelot, and other volumes treating of pure science. Guy de Malivert was, however, no savant. He had been anything but a hard student at college; but after his graduation, and when his education was supposed to be finished, it seemed to him a shame to be ignorant of all the splendid discoveries which form the glory of our century. He applied himself, therefore, to the enrichment of his mind, and was eventually quite capable of discoursing intelligently upon almost any subject—astronomy, cosmogony, electricity, steam, photography, chemistry, micrography, or spontaneous generation. He listened with due appreciation of what was said, and he not infrequently astonished the person with whom he happened to be discussing any of these subjects, by the cleverness and originality of his remarks.

Such was Guy de Malivert at the age of twenty-eight or twenty-nine. The expression of his face was open, frank, and pleasing; his nose, without possessing the regularity of that of a Greek statue, was by no means lacking in refinement, and separated two large brown eyes, which met one with the brave, honest gaze of a man with nothing to hide; his rather full lips evinced a kind and sympathetic nature; his hair, of a warm chestnut, was massed above his broad, white forehead in a profusion of short, wavy curls, and a mustache of reddish-gold shaded his upper lip. In short, Malivert was what is called a handsome fellow, and upon his entrance into society it required little effort upon his part for him to become a prime favorite with the fair sex. Matrons blessed with daughters to be married off, overwhelmed him with agreeable little attentions; for, in addition to his other attractions, he was the happy possessor of an income of forty thousand francs a year in his own right, and the sole heir of an eccentric uncle, many times a millionaire—on the whole, a young man occupying a most enviable position. In spite of all, however, Guy had never married; he had contented himself with amiably applauding the sonatas which the young women executed for his benefit, and he courteously went through his duties in the cotillion; but his conversation with his partners, during the pauses in the dance, was limited to some such observation as, "This room is very warm," an aphorism from which it was impossible to deduct the slightest matrimonial hope. It was not that he was wanting in conversational powers; he would have experienced no difficulty in finding something less commonplace to say if he had not feared to become entangled in those strong meshes, as dangerous as is the web of the spider to the unsuspecting fly, which are stretched in society about marriageable virgins possessed of meager dowries.

When he perceived that he was received with a suspicious warmth in any particular house, he ceased to go there, or he set out on a long journey, and on his return experienced the satisfaction of finding himself completely forgotten. You may imagine, perhaps, that, like many young men of the present day, Guy found in the ranks of the *demimonde* transient, morganatic unions, which took the place, to a certain extent, of a marriage blessed by church and state; but such an idea would be very far from the actual truth. Without being more strict than was in keeping with his years, Malivert was not attracted by those painted beauties, with banged hair and extravagant costumes. It was a pure matter of taste and temperament. Like every one else, he had met with a certain success in affairs of gallantry. Two or three women, who imagined themselves misunderstood by their husbands, and who were more or less separated from their liege lords in consequence, had proclaimed him their ideal, winning from him, however, no other response than "You are very kind;" for Malivert was courteous to a fault, and preferred not to tell them that they were not at all *his* ideal. In addition to this, a little ballet-girl of the Délassements Comiques, to whom he had given a few gold pieces and a velvet wrap, pretended that she had been forsaken, and attempted to asphyxiate herself in his honor; but, in spite of these fine adventures, Guy de Malivert, at the solemn age of twenty-nine, frankly confessed to himself that he was approaching the limits of real youth and was still ignorant of love—at least, of such love as is depicted in poem, drama, and romance, or even such as his comrades painted when in a confidential or bragging mood. He found ample consolation for this misfortune, however, in reflecting upon the worries, troubles, and calamities that usually follow in the train of the tender passion, and he possessed his soul in patience until the day should come when would appear the fateful being who was destined to bind him in her chains.

Yet, as the world often disposes of us at its own sweet will and fancy, it had been decided, in those circles where Guy was most intimate, that he was in love with a certain Madame d'Ymbercourt, a young widow, at whose house he was on terms of more or less intimacy. Madame d'Ymbercourt's property joined that of Guy; she was in possession of an income of sixty thousand francs a year, and was only twenty-two years old. She had paid all due observances to the memory of Monsieur d'Ymbercourt—a man much older than herself—and her position permitted her, if she so desired, to marry a young and handsome man of a rank and fortune equal to her own. Society had already mated her with Guy de Malivert, thinking that their house would be a pleasant one to go to—a neutral ground on which to meet. Madame d'Ymbercourt tacitly accepted this match, and regarded herself as Guy's future wife. The young man, however, was in no haste to declare himself; on the contrary, at times he even debated the question whether he should not cease his visits to the house of the pretty widow, who annoyed him somewhat by her premature demands upon his exclusive attention.

This very evening, indeed, Guy had promised to go to a small gathering at Madame d'Ymbercourt's; but after dinner a disinclination to make any exertion had taken possession of him, and he felt so comfortable at home that he had recoiled from the idea of dressing and venturing forth on a night when the thermometer was several degrees below zero, in spite of the fact that he would be wrapped in furs and that his carriage was provided with foot-warmers. As an excuse, he told himself that his horse was not shod for frosty weather, and might have a bad fall on the glazed surface of the snow. Besides, he did not care to leave exposed to the piercing wind for two or three hours an animal for which he had paid Cremieux, the famous horse-dealer in the Champs-Elysées, the sum of five thousand francs. From these reflections of Guy, the deduction can easily be drawn that the young man was not over head and ears in love, and that in all probability Madame d'Ymbercourt would have to wait a long time for the ceremony which would permit her to bear another name.

As Malivert—rendered drowsy by the soft, warm atmosphere of the room, where floated in bluish, fragrant clouds the smoke of two or three cabañas, the ashes of which filled a little Chinese cup of antique bronze placed beside him upon the table that supported the lamp—was beginning to feel upon his eyelids the gentle fall of the golden dust of the sandman, the door of the room was cautiously opened, and a domestic appeared, bearing upon a silver salver a small, perfumed note, sealed with a device doubtless familiar to Guy, for as he caught sight of it his features contracted in a frown. The powerful scent of the paper seemed also to disagreeably impress him. The note was from Madame d'Ymbercourt, to remind him of his promise to come and take a cup of tea with her.

"Confound her!" he exclaimed, with scant gallantry, "and her scented notes, which give one a headache! Great pleasure it will give me to go to the other side of the city to drink a cup of warm water flavored with a few leaves tainted with Prussian blue and verdigris, when I have in that lacquered box Caravan tea—real tea, bearing still the stamp of the custom-house of Kiatka, the last Russian post on the frontiers of China! No; decidedly, I will not go!"

Nevertheless, a certain remnant of courtesy made him change his mind, and he told his valet to bring him his evening clothes; but when he saw the legs of the trousers hanging piteously over the back of a chair, the shirt stiff and white as a surface of porcelain; the black coat with its limp arms, the glazed, shining shoes, and the gloves stretched out and looking like hands which had been run through a wringing-machine, his heart failed him again, and he flung himself back in his comfortable chair.

"I will stay at home. Jack, take the covers off my bed!"

We have said before that Guy was a well-bred fellow, and, moreover, he had a kind heart; so, troubled by a slight twinge of remorse, he hesitated on the threshold of his bedroom, which seemed to extend to him a smiling welcome, and reflected that the most ordinary courtesy exacted at least a word of excuse to Madame d'Ymbercourt—the pretext of a headache, an important business matter, some accident just as he was about to leave the house, or anything which might be accepted as a sufficient reason for his failure to keep his engagement. Now, Malivert, although capable—without being a professional man of letters—of writing an article or a novelette for the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, abhorred letter-writing of every description, and shrank especially from those purely social notes which women scribble by the dozens upon the edge of their dressing-table, while Clotilde or Rose is brushing their hair. He would far rather have composed a sonnet with rare and difficult rhymes. His sterility in correspondence was complete, and to avoid writing an answer of two or three lines he would go in person from one end of the city to the other. Terror-stricken at the idea of a note of excuse, the desperate idea of going to Madame d'Ymbercourt's returned to him. He approached the window, parted the draperies, and through the frosted panes looked out at the whirl of the snowflakes dancing against the black background of the night. He thought of Grymalkin shaking off the fluffy masses of snow which clung to his glistening harness; he experienced in imagination the disagreeable passage from the coupé to the vestibule, the draughts of the staircase which no artificial warmth could neutralize; he pictured in his mind Madame d'Ymbercourt standing before the fire-place in full dress, the neck of her gown cut so low as to recall that character in one of Charles Dickens' novels who is always referred to as "The Bosom," and whose white expanse of uncovered neck serves as a sort of prospectus upon which to display the opulence of her banker husband; he saw her superb teeth displayed in a set, expressionless smile; her perfectly arched eyebrows, which gave one the impression, false though it was, that they were traced with India ink; her magnificent eyes; her nose, regular enough to serve as a model in a drawing-book; her figure, which all dressmakers pronounced faultless; and her arms, as rounded as if they had been turned in a machine, and loaded with heavy bracelets. The memory of all these charms, which the world destined for him by marrying him to the young widow, cast him into a state of dejection so profound that he turned to his desk, resolved, frightful task as it was, to write a dozen lines rather than go and take tea with this charming woman.

He drew toward him a sheet of cream-laid paper, stamped with a G and an M fancifully interwoven, dipped in the ink a fine steel pen in a holder fashioned from the quill of a porcupine, and wrote—quite low down the page, in order to diminish as much as possible the blank space which would have to be filled up—the triumphant word, "Madame." There he paused, and rested his cheek in the palm of his hand, his muse refusing him any further inspiration. For several minutes he remained thus in a motionless attitude, his hand in position to write, the fingers grasping the pen, and his brain involuntarily occupied with ideas quite at variance with the subject of his letter. As if, while waiting for the words and sentences which did not come, he had become physically wearied, his hand suddenly began to move impatiently, and seemed to be seized with a nervous desire to enter upon its task. The thumb and forefinger were extended and drawn back as in the act of forming letters, and finally Guy was greatly astonished to find that, without being in the least aware of it, he had written nine or ten lines, which he read over, and found the sense to be about as follows:

"You are beautiful enough and have sufficient adorers at your feet to permit a man to say to you without offense that he does not love you. It is simply an evidence of bad taste on the part of the one making that avowal. What advantage is there in continuing relations which would end in the union of two beings so little suited to one another, binding them together in an unhappiness that would have no end? Pardon me; I am going away, and you will have no difficulty in forgetting me."

Malivert read these words over twice, and then, bringing his hand down heavily on the table, he exclaimed: "Am I mad or dreaming? That is a strange letter to have written! It is like those lithographs of Gavarni where you see side by side the words written and the words thought—only in this case the written words are identical with the thought. My hand refused to lend itself to the pretty little social lie I intended to indite, and, contrary to usual custom, the real idea is expressed in the letter."

He took up the note and examined it attentively; it seemed to him that the character of the handwriting was far from being the same that it was his habit to employ.

"That is a writing," he thought, "which would most certainly be contested by experts if my epistolary efforts were worth that trouble. How under the sun has this strange transformation been accomplished? I have smoked no opium, eaten no hasheesh, and the two or three glasses of Burgundy I drank at dinner can not have affected my head. My brain is too strong for that. What will become of me if the truth continues to flow from my pen, without my will or consciousness? It was fortunate for me that I was not very sure of my orthography this evening, and so read over my note. What an effect those pleasant and altogether too truthful lines would have produced, and how indignant and amazed Madame d'Ymbercourt would have been at reading them! Perhaps it would have been the best thing that could happen if the letter had gone just as it is; I should have been branded as a monster, a tattooed savage, unfit ever to wear a dress-coat and a white cravat; but, at all events, this wearisome bondage would have been broken forever. If I were in the slightest degree superstitious, I should see in this extraordinary letter a warning from Heaven instead of a peculiar state of abstraction on my part."

After a moment's further reflection, Guy formed a sudden resolution. "I will go to Madame d'Ymbercourt's, for I am incapable of rewriting that letter." He dressed with feverish haste, and prepared to depart; but, as he was about to open the door, he thought he heard a sigh—a sigh so soft, so light, so ethereal, that only in the profound silence of the night could the ear have caught it.

Malivert paused upon the threshold of the study. The sigh impressed him with that indefinable feeling of awe that the supernatural always causes in the bravest hearts. There was nothing terrifying in that vague, inarticulate, plaintive note, and yet Guy felt more troubled than he would have cared to confess, even to himself.

"Bah! it was the cat breathing heavily in her sleep," he said, half aloud; and, taking from the hands of his valet a heavy fur coat, he enveloped himself in it with a skill that showed frequent visits to Russia, descended the stairs in a bad enough humor, and entered his carriage, which was waiting for him before the door.

Chapter II

VISIT TO MADAME

Ensconced in a corner of his coupé, with his feet upon the can of hot water and his furs wrapped tightly about him, Malivert regarded aimlessly the long perspectives of the streets starred here and there with points of brilliancy, and the odd, shifting effects of light and shade produced upon the slightly misted pane by a sudden flash from some gas-illumined shop still open at this late hour.

The carriage soon crossed the Pont de la Concorde, beneath which flowed the heavy water of the Seine, reflecting in its dark bosom the thousand gas-jets along the banks. As he rolled steadily on, Malivert found it impossible to prevent his thoughts reverting to the mysterious sigh, which he had heard, or thought he had heard, as he was leaving his apartments. He brought up all those natural reasons which sceptics adduce to explain the inexplicable. It must, doubtless, have been the wind in the chimney or in the corridor; some sound from outside modified by the echo; the dull vibration of one of the piano strings shaken by the passing of a heavy vehicle; or even, as he had at first imagined, the breathing of his Angora dreaming before the fire. Nothing was more probable, nothing could be more in accordance with common sense; and yet, while recognizing how logical these explanations were, in his innermost heart Malivert was far from being satisfied by them. A secret instinct told him that the sigh was due to none of the causes to which his philosophical prudence attributed it; he felt that the gentle, plaintive murmur came from a soul, and was not a vague sound produced by matter. There had been a note of sorrow in it; whence could it have proceeded? Guy thought of it with that sort of perplexed anxiety which the strongest natures feel when brought, without their own volition, face to face with the unknown. There was no one in the room—no one except Jack, a creature decidedly lacking in sentiment—and the sigh, delicately modulated, harmonious, touching, fainter than the soft whispering of a summer breeze amidst the leaves of an aspen, was indubitably *feminine;* it was impossible to deny it that characteristic.

There was another circumstance which puzzled Malivert, and that was the letter which was written, so to speak, all by itself, as if a will other than his own had guided his fingers. The idea that he had been attacked by a fit of absentmindedness, with which he had at first attempted to explain the occurrence, was far from satisfactory. The sentiments of the heart are subjected to the control of the mind before being transferred to paper, and, besides, they do not arrange themselves into words and sentences while the brain is dreaming of something else. Some influence, which he was incapable of defining, must have taken possession of him while he was buried in reflection, and acted in his stead; for the more he thought about it, the more convinced he became that he had not been asleep for a single moment. All evening he had been lazy and drowsy, overcome by the torpor caused by the delicious comfort of his surroundings; but when he started to write the letter, he was thoroughly wide-awake. The annoying alternative of going to Madame d'Ymbercourt's or of writing a note of excuse had irritated and aroused him; those marks of the pen which summed up his secret thoughts in a truer and clearer manner than he would as yet confess, were due to an intervention which must be qualified by the word supernatural until scientific analysis has explained it or given it another title.

While Guy de Malivert was revolving these questions in his head, the carriage rolled through the streets, which the cold and snow rendered more deserted than was ordinarily the case in these wealthy and fashionable quarters, where late hours are the rule with everybody. The Place de la Concorde, the Rue de Rivoli, the Place Vendôme were rapidly left behind, and the coupé, following the boulevard, turned the corner of the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, where Madame d'Ymbercourt lived.

As he entered the court-yard, Guy experienced a disagreeable sensation; two lines of carriages, with the coachmen shrouded in furs, filled the sanded space in the center, and the impatient horses, champing their bits, threw off flecks of foam to mingle with the snowflakes upon the ground.

"This is what she calls a quiet evening—a cup of tea by the fireside! she never has anything else! All Paris will be here; and I did not put on a white cravat!" growled Malivert. "It would have been much better if I had gone to bed, but I tried to be a diplomat like Talleyrand: I would not follow my first impulse because it seemed a good one."

He mounted the staircase with a lagging step, and, after ridding himself of his coat, he made his way to the salon. A footman opened the doors for him with a sort of obsequious and knowing deference, as if recognizing that something more than ordinary courtesy was due the man who would soon be the master of the house, and in whose service he desired to remain.

"What," muttered Guy de Malivert beneath his breath, as he noticed this servility, more accentuated than common, "has it come to such a pass that even servants dispose of my person and marry me off-hand to Madame d'Ymbercourt? The bans are not published yet, however."

As Madame d'Ymbercourt saw Guy advancing toward her with bowed head and crouched back, which is the modern form of salutation, she uttered a little exclamation of satisfaction, which was quickly repressed, however, in an effort to assume an air of injured innocence. But her lips were too accustomed to display the two rows of perfect teeth, and even a little of the pink gums, in a perpetual smile, to easily form the pout she demanded of them, and the lady, perceiving by a furtive glance in the mirror that the desired expression was not a success, determined to change her rôle to that of an indulgent woman, who knows that too much gallantry must not be exacted of men in these degenerate days.

"How late you are, Monsieur Guy!" she said, extending to him a little hand so tightly gloved that it seemed to the touch as if carved of wood. "I suppose you have been loitering at your miserable club, smoking and playing cards. You are sufficiently punished, however, for you have missed hearing the great German pianist, Kreisler, play Liszt's chromatic galop, and that charming Countess Salvarosa sing the romance from Saul as it has never been sung since the days of Malibran."

Guy, in a few polite words, expressed his regret, which, to tell the truth, was anything but keen, to miss the galop of the virtuoso and the aria of the society woman; and as he felt a little embarrassed at having about his neck, among all these correctly dressed people, a band of black silk instead of one of white lawn, he attempted to withdraw and gain some corner less flooded with light, where he could hide more easily in the relative obscurity this involuntary solecism in his dress. He had much difficulty in putting this resolution into execution, however, for Madame d'Ymbercourt continually drew him back to the circle of which she was the center, by a glance or some word demanding a response, which Guy made as brief as possible; but at last he succeeded in reaching a door-way which led from the large salon to a smaller one, arranged as a conservatory and filled with trellises covered with camellias.

Madame d'Ymbercourt's salon was white and gold; the walls were hung with crimson India damask; the chairs and sofas were large, comfortable, and well upholstered; the gilded chandeliers held candles set in a foliage of rock crystal; lamps, vases, and a large, highly decorated clock adorned the white marble mantelpiece. A handsome carpet, as thick as the turf of an English lawn, was spread under foot. Rich, heavy curtains screened the windows, and in a panel, magnificently framed, smiled, even more than the original, a portrait of the Countess painted by Winterhalter.

There was nothing in this salon, furnished with beautiful and expensive things, which could not be procured by anyone with a purse long enough to have no fear of heavy bills from the decorator and upholsterer. Its richness was in good taste enough, but it was commonplace—it lacked the stamp of individuality. There was nothing to show the character of the owner, and if the mistress of the house had been absent, one might have thought oneself in the salon of a banker, a lawyer, or some American bird of passage. All personality was conspicuously wanting. Guy, therefore, who was endowed with an artistic temperament, found all this luxury frightfully ordinary, and as distasteful as possible. It was, however, excellently suited to Madame d'Ymbercourt, whose beauty was somewhat vulgarly perfect.

In the middle of the room, upon a circular divan, surmounted by a large Chinese vase in which bloomed a rare exotic plant (the very name of which was unknown to Madame d'Ymbercourt, and which had been placed there by her gardener), were seated, amidst billows of gauze, tulle, lace, satin, and velvet, women, for the most part young and handsome, whose toilettes, in their extravagant caprice, demonstrated that they had been evolved from the brain of the inexhaustible and costly Worth. In their brown, yellow, red, and even powdered tresses, of such opulence as to lead even the least malevolent person to suppose that, contrary to Monsieur Planard's romance, art must have been called in to adorn nature, gleamed diamonds, waved plumes, flourished leaves sparkling with dew-drops, blossomed real or chimerical flowers, rattled strings of sequins, intersected rows of pearls, glittered arrows, daggers, and fanciful pins, shone garnishments of beetles' wings, twisted bands of gold, trembled at the end of their spiral settings stars of precious stones, and, in general, all that can adorn the head of a fashionable woman, without counting the grapes, currants, and brilliantly colored berries which Pomona might offer to Flora to complete her evening coiffure, if it is permitted to an author who writes in this year of grace to make use of mythological similes.

Leaning against the jamb of the door, Guy contemplated the smooth, satin-like shoulders dusted with rice-powder, the coquettish little curls straying over the nape of the neck, and the white bosoms, at times a little too freely displayed by the slipping down of the shoulder-strap which did duty for a sleeve. This little misfortune, however, is one to which a woman who is sure of her charms becomes easily resigned. The movement to raise the sleeve is a most graceful one, and gives an opportunity for pretty positions of the hand as it adjusts the fit of the gown. Our hero abandoned himself to this interesting study, which he preferred to tiresome conversation, and which, indeed, he declared was the only benefit to be derived from a ball or reception. With a nonchalant eye he glanced over these living books of beauty—these animated keepsakes which society strews through its salons as it heaps its tables with stereoscopes, albums, and magazines for the use of timid and bashful people. He enjoyed this pastime with all the more security, because, in consequence of the extended rumors of his approaching marriage to Madame d'Ymbercourt, he was no longer obliged to keep watch of his glances, which had formerly been so jealously scrutinized by mothers who were anxious to obtain a fine establishment for their daughters. No one now expected anything of him. He had ceased to be an object to be envied and struggled for; his place in life was settled, and, although more than one woman secretly believed that he might have made a better choice, the affair was accepted in a becoming spirit. He could, without fear of the consequences, even address to any young girl he pleased two or three consecutive remarks—was he not the future husband of Madame d'Ymbercourt?

In the same door-way with Monsieur Guy de Malivert stood a young man whom he often met at the club, and whose intelligence and wit, tinged as they were with a certain foreign flavor of northern lands, had made a most favorable impression upon him. This young man was the Baron de Féroë, a Swede, a compatriot of Swedenborg, like him hanging over the abyss of mysticism, and as much occupied with the other world as with this. His appearance was peculiar. His fair hair, almost as straight as an Indian's, seemed even lighter in color than his skin, and his mustache was of such a pale-gold hue that it might almost be described as silver. His eyes, of a bluish-gray, wore an expression hard to define, and although they were usually half veiled by long, whitish lashes, they at times shot forth a piercing, brilliant glance which seemed to penetrate beyond the range of human vision. The Baron de Féroë, however, was too thorough a gentleman to affect the slightest eccentricity; his manners were correct and cold, and he never assumed, for the benefit of a gaping public, the airs and graces of a visionary. On this particular evening, as, after Madame d'Ymbercourt's tea, he was due at a ball to be given at the Austrian Embassy, he was in full dress, and against the black surface of his coat gleamed, suspended from a slender gold chain, the crosses of The Elephant and of Dannebrog, a Prussian decoration, the Order of Saint Alexander Newsky, and other decorations of the courts of the North, which proclaimed his services in the ranks of diplomacy.

Baron de Féroë was really a very singular man; but his peculiarities did not strike one at first, his whole personality was so enveloped and disguised in an outward garb of diplomatic phlegm. He was seen everywhere in society—at balls, official receptions, the clubs, and the opera; but, while apparently in every respect a man of the world, his private life was wrapped in mystery. He had no intimate friends or companions. In his house, which was kept in the most beautiful order, no visitor was ever allowed to pass the first reception-room; the door which led to the other apartments was, under no circumstances, opened to anyone. Like the Turks, he admitted the outer world to one room alone, a room which was evidently used for no other purpose, for after the departure of his visitors he at once retreated to the privacy beyond. What his occupations were, no one knew. He occasionally retired from the world for long periods, and those who noticed his disappearance attributed it to some secret mission, or to a journey to Sweden, where his family lived; but, during these absences, anyone who chanced to pass at a late hour through the unfrequented street where the Baron lived, might have seen his windows lighted, and sometimes have discovered the gentleman himself leaning on the balcony and lost in absorbed contemplation of the stars. But no one had any interest in spying upon the Baron de Féroë. He rendered to the world what was strictly its due, and the world asked nothing more of him. With women, his perfect courtesy never passed certain limits, even when without risk he might have ventured a little further. In spite of his coldness, he was not unpopular. The pure, classic outlines of his features recalled Thorwaldsen's Græco-Scandinavian statues. "He is a frozen Apollo," said of him the beautiful Countess de C——, who, if report is to be believed, had tried to penetrate his icy exterior.

The Baron, following Malivert's example, had his eyes fixed upon the exquisite contour of a neck of snowy whiteness. "A very pretty woman," he remarked to Guy, with a meaning glance. "What a pity it is that she has no soul! Whoever falls in love with her will meet the same fate as the student Nathaniel, in Hoffman's story, The Sand Man; he will run the risk of dancing with a manikin in his arms, and that is a dance of death for a man of heart."

"Have no fear, my dear Baron," responded Guy, laughing; "I have no desire to fall in love with the being to whom those beautiful shoulders belong, although beautiful shoulders in themselves are not to be disdained. Just at present, I acknowledge, to my shame, I do not feel a scintillation of the tender passion for any woman whatever."

"What! not even for Madame d'Ymbercourt, whom report says you are going to marry?" retorted Baron de Féroë, with an air of mingled irony and incredulity.

"There are in this world," replied Malivert, borrowing from Molière, "people who would marry the Grand Turk to the Republic of Venice; but I certainly hope to remain a bachelor."

"That is a wise resolution," said the Baron, with a sudden change of both voice and manner from a friendly familiarity to a mysterious solemnity; "do not pledge yourself to any terrestrial bond. Remain free for the love which may perhaps descend upon you. Spirits are watching you, and you might perhaps suffer eternal remorse in the other world for a fault committed in this."

As the young Swedish Baron spoke these strange words, his steel-blue eyes gleamed and glowed with such a brilliant flame that Guy almost fancied he could feel the fiery rays penetrate his breast.

So much had happened to him this evening that was odd and unaccountable, that he received his companion's mysterious advice in a more serious mood than he would have done a day earlier. He turned upon the Swede a look of questioning astonishment, as if to beg him to speak more clearly; but Monsieur de Féroë glanced at his watch, and exclaiming, "I shall be late at the Embassy!" grasped Malivert's hand with a strong, swift pressure, and, without rumpling a gown, without stepping upon a train, without becoming entangled in lace or ribbon, opened a passage for himself through the crowd with a skill and grace which showed his familiarity with society.

"Well, Guy! are you not coming to take a cup of tea?" sounded the voice of Madame d'Ymbercourt, who had at last discovered her reputed adorer leaning dreamily against the door of the little salon; and Malivert was obliged to follow the mistress of the house to the table where smoked the hot beverage in a silver urn, surrounded by costly china cups.

The real was endeavoring to recapture its prey from the ideal.

CHAPTER III

ARRIVAL OF THE BARON

The extraordinary words of the Baron de Féroë, and the almost abrupt disappearance of the young diplomat immediately after he had uttered them, furnished Guy with ample food for thought as he returned to the Fauborg Saint-Germain, borne along at a rapid gait by Grymalkin, who was doubtless longing to be sheltered from the stinging blast in his warm and comfortable box-stall, although, like the animal of good blood that he was, he did not need this incentive to spur him on to his best endeavors.

"What under the sun did he mean by his solemn enigmas, uttered in the tone of an expounder of mysteries?" thought Guy, as, with the aid of Jack, he divested himself of his garments and prepared for bed. "The Baron is certainly anything but romantic; he is calm, polished, and self-possessed, and his manners, for all their exquisite and precise courtesy, are so cold that the wind of the North Pole would appear warm in comparison. That he was making game of me is an idea not to be entertained for a moment. No one would dare attempt such a liberty with Guy de Malivert, even were he as fearless a man as the Swede with the white lashes; and, besides, what would be the motive of such a proceeding? At all events, he could not have enjoyed his joke, for he hastened away as if determined to say no more. Bah! I will think no more of this trash; I shall see the Baron to-morrow at the club, and he will doubtless be more explicit. I will go to bed now, and try to sleep, whether the spirits are watching me or not."

And, in fact, Guy did go to bed; but sleep refused to rest upon his eyelids as he had hoped, although he called to his aid the most soporific books, which he read with the most intense, mechanical attention. In spite of himself, he listened to the faint, almost imperceptible, sounds which can always be heard, even in what seems to be the most complete silence. The peculiar click of the clock just before sounding the hours and the half-hours, the sputtering of sparks under the ashes, the cracking of the wood-work contracted by the heat, the gurgle of the oil falling in the lamp, the occasional puff of air whistling under the door in spite of the weather-strips, the unexpected sliding of a newspaper from his bed to the floor, made him start, so overwrought were his nerves, as the sudden explosion of a fire-arm might have done at any other time. His hearing was sharpened to such a point that he could hear the pulsations of his arteries and the beating of his heart almost up to his throat. But, among all these confused murmurs, he could distinguish nothing that resembled a sigh.

His eyes, which he closed from time to time, in the hope of wooing sleep, soon reopened, and explored the corners of the chamber with a curiosity which was not devoid of apprehension. He keenly desired to discover something, and yet he dreaded having his longing gratified. At times his dilated pupils fancied they perceived vague, indistinct forms in the recesses where the light of the lamp, softened by a green shade, did not fully penetrate; the folds of the curtains assumed the aspect of feminine garments, and seemed to sway as if propelled by the movement of a body, but this was purely the effect of an illusive imagination; jagged flashes, luminous points, kaleidoscopic spots of changing designs, butterflies, undulating, pulsating lines, danced, swarmed, increased, and diminished beneath his weary gaze, without his being able to distinguish anything tangible.

More troubled than he would have cared to acknowledge, and feeling, although he neither heard nor saw anything, the presence of something weird in his chamber, he rose, threw about him a camel's-hair robe which he had brought from Cairo, cast two or three logs upon the andirons, and sat down before the fireplace in a big arm-chair, more comfortable for a man afflicted with insomnia than a bed inartistically made by a feeble old woman. All at once he perceived upon the carpet, near the arm-chair, a crumpled piece of paper, which he picked up, and found to be the note that he had written to Madame d'Ymbercourt, under that extraordinary impulse, which he had not yet succeeded in satisfactorily explaining. He unfolded it, smoothed out the creases, and noticed, after careful scrutiny, that the character of the handwriting differed somewhat from his own. One would have said that an impatient hand which could not confine itself to a fac-simile, an exact following of the model, had mingled with the letters of the original, strokes and peculiarities of its own chirography. There was a certain feminine delicacy in the whole appearance of the lines traced. While noting these details, Guy thought of Edgar Poe's Gold Bug, and the marvelous sagacity with which William Legrand deciphered the cryptogram in which Captain Kidd had designated the precise spot where his treasures lay buried. He would have been well content to possess that profound intuition which made such bold and exact guesses, supplied the missing places, and joined together again the broken links of the chain. But in this case, Legrand himself, even with the aid of Auguste Dupin of the Stolen Letter and The Murder in the Rue Morgue, could not by human means have divined the secret power which had guided Malivert's hand.

However, Guy finally fell into that heavy, dreamless sleep which succeeds a night of insomnia and heralds the approach of dawn. When Jack entered to light the fire and assist his master with his toilet, he awoke with a chilly, uncomfortable feeling; he yawned, stretched, shook himself, splashed about in the cold water of his bath, and refreshed by his ablutions, soon regained complete possession of his senses. Jack drew aside the curtains and threw open the blinds; and "gray-eyed morn," as Shakspere says, descending, not over the summits of green hills, but over the tops of white roofs, glided into the apartment and, by lending an air of reality to everything, put to flight all nocturnal chimeras. Nothing is so reassuring as sunlight, even when it proceeds from a pale winter's sun, like that which penetrated through the feathery foliage which the Frost King had engraved upon the window-panes.

Having recovered his usual serenity of mind, Malivert was astonished at the uneasy night he had passed, and said to himself: "I did not know I was so nervous." Then he tore open the wrapper of the morning's papers, glanced at the feuilletons, read the telegraphic news, picked up the volume of Evangeline which he had cast aside the previous evening, smoked a cigar, and these various occupations having brought him to eleven o'clock, he dressed himself, and concluded, for the sake of the exercise, to go on foot to the Café Bignon for breakfast. The frost had hardened the snow of the previous night, and as he crossed the gardens of the Tuileries, he admired the mythological statues all powdered with white, and the magnificent chestnut-trees draped in mantles of sparkling silver. He made an excellent breakfast, like a man who wishes to repair the ravages caused by late hours, and chatted gaily with his companions, the fine flower of Parisian wit and scepticism, who had adopted as their motto the Greek maxim: Remember to believe in nothing.

However, when their jests became a little too highly flavored, Guy smiled with an air of constraint; for some reason or other, he found it impossible to completely abandon himself to their paradoxes of disbelief and their parade of cynicism. The words of the Baron de Féroë, "Spirits are watching you," returned involuntarily to his mind, and it seemed to him that there was behind him a presence of a mysterious nature. He rose, waved his hand in farewell to his friends, and took a few turns up and down that boulevard where passes in a day more intelligence than is to be found in a year throughout all the rest of the globe; but as he found it to-day somewhat deserted on account of the cold, he turned mechanically the corner of the Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, and in a few moments found himself before the house of Madame d'Ymbercourt. As he was about to press the electric button, he fancied that he felt a soft breath upon his cheek, and that he heard, murmured very low but very distinctly, these words: "Do not enter." He turned quickly, but there was no one in sight.

"Am I going mad?" he muttered. "I have hallucinations in broad daylight now. Shall I obey that odd injunction, or not?"

But, with the quick movement he had made in turning, his finger placed upon the button had rung the bell; the door had opened, and the concierge, in front of his lodge, was regarding Malivert as he stood hesitating upon the threshold. He was obliged to enter, although he had little desire to do so after the supernatural incident which had happened; and he was welcomed by Madame d'Ymbercourt in the little yellow and blue salon where she received morning visitors, and the coloring of which was particularly displeasing to Guy. "Is not yellow becoming to brunettes?" had been the Countess' answer, when he had ventured to suggest that she should change the odious decoration.

Madame d'Ymbercourt was arrayed in a gown of black satin, with a vest of brilliant color, and with more cords, embroidery, jet, and passementerie than ever a *maja* going to a *feria* or a bullfight wore upon her basquine. The Countess, woman of the world that she was, made the mistake of wearing those impossible costumes which are never seen except upon the figures with pink cheeks and mouths like a Cupid's bow to be found in the plates of a fashion magazine.

To-day, Madame d'Ymbercourt's face wore an unusual expression of gravity; a shade of annoyance rested upon her brow, which was ordinarily so serene, and the corners of her mouth were slightly drawn down. One of her intimate friends, who had just left her, had asked her, with the feigned kindliness women always display on such occasions, if the date of her marriage to Guy had been fixed; the Countess had blushed, faltered, and answered vaguely that it would take place soon; for Guy, whom everybody looked upon as her promised husband, had never asked her hand, nor even made a formal declaration of his love, which Madame d'Ymbercourt attributed to a respectful timidity, and also, perhaps, to that feeling of hesitation which every young man experiences on the eve of abandoning his free bachelor's life. But she firmly believed that he would declare himself one day or another, and she was so certain of becoming his wife that she had arranged in her head the alterations which the presence of a husband would demand. "This shall be Guy's bed room, this his study, and this his smoking-room," she had said to herself more than once as she walked through certain rooms of her house.

Although he did not care particularly for the lady, Guy was compelled to acknowledge that she was very handsome, that she enjoyed a spotless reputation, and that she was possessed of a considerable fortune. Like all men whose hearts are empty, he had allowed himself to become intimate at the house where he met with a warmer reception than at any other. If he absented himself for a few days, a note, amiably reproaching him for his neglect, would force him to reappear.

Besides, why should he not go there? Madame d'Ymbercourt moved in excellent society, and on certain days he was sure of meeting in her salon many of his friends, whom it would have been less convenient to seek elsewhere in the hurly-burly of Parisian life.

"You are looking a trifle pale," said Malivert to the Countess. "Was your rest disturbed by the imps of green tea?"

"Oh, no; I took so much cream with it that it lost all its strength. And then, I am the Mithridates of tea; it never affects me. It is not that. I am annoyed."

"Does my presence disturb any of your plans? If so, I will retire, and it shall be as if I had not found you in and had left my card with the concierge."

"Your presence never disturbs me, and you know that I am always glad to see you," returned the Countess. "I ought not to say it to you, perhaps, but your visits seem to me rare enough, although they appear too frequent to others."

"Are you not your own mistress, with no disagreeable relative, no tiresome brother, no doting uncle, nor watchful aunt working at her embroidery in the embrasure of a window? Kind nature has freed you from those unpleasant beings who are too often found clustered about a pretty woman. You can receive whom you please, for you are answerable to no one."

"That is true," replied Madame d'Ymbercourt; "I am answerable to no one in particular, but I am answerable to everyone in general. A woman is never completely emancipated, even if she be a widow and to all appearances mistress of her actions. A whole police force of disinterested spies surround her and busy themselves with her affairs. Therefore, my dear Guy, you are compromising me."

"I compromising you!" exclaimed Malivert, with a genuine astonishment which showed a modesty rare enough in young and handsome man, who had his coats built at Renard's and his trousers cut in England. "Why I, rather than d'Aversac, Beaumont, Yanowski, or Féroë, who are very devoted in their attentions to you?"

"I scarcely know how to tell you," answered the Countess. "Perhaps you are dangerous without being aware of it, or everybody has credited you with power of which you are ignorant. No one has ever mentioned the name of any of these gentlemen you speak of in connection with mine; it is deemed quite natural that they should come to my Wednesdays, call on me from five to six o'clock on their return from the Bois, and appear in my box at the Bouffons or the Opera. But these actions, innocent in themselves, have, it seems, when committed by you, a terrible significance."

"And yet I am the most ordinary fellow in the world. Neither figuratively nor in reality do I wear a blue frock-coat like Werther, or a slashed doublet like Don Juan. No one has ever seen me strum a guitar beneath a balcony; I do not drive in a dog-cart with ladies in startling toilettes, nor do I, in society, discuss questions of sentiment with pretty women to display the purity and delicacy of my heart. No one sees me posing against a column, with my hand thrust in my waistcoat, and my eyes fixed, with a sombre, moody expression, upon some pale beauty with long ringlets, like the Kitty Bell of Alfred de Vigny. Do I wear on my fingers rings containing locks of hair, and upon my breast a sachet filled with Parma violets presented by *her?* Search the innermost recesses of my desk, and you will find no portrait of either blonde or brunette, no packages of letters tied with a blue ribbon, no embroidered slipper, no lace mask, nor any of the knickknacks that compose the secret museum of lovers. Frankly, have I the air of a lady-killer?"

"You are very modest," retorted Madame d'Ymbercourt, "or you are affecting an innocence you do not possess; but everyone, unfortunately, is not of your opinion. There has been much talk about the attentions you have paid me, although, for my part, I see no harm in them."

"Very well," said Malivert, "I will restrict my visits, then, and come here not oftener than once a fortnight or once a month; and then I will take a trip away somewhere. Where shall I go? I know by heart Spain, Italy, Germany, and Russia. I might go to Greece! Not to have seen Athens, the Acropolis, and the Parthenon is a crime. You can go to Marseilles, and embark for Trieste on an Austrian Lloyd's steamer. You touch at Corfu; you see, in passing, Ithaca, *soli occidenti bene objacentem,* well exposed to the setting sun, to-day as in the time of Homer. You penetrate into the Gulf of Lepanto. You cross the isthmus, and you see what remains of Corinth, where it was not given to everyone to go. You take another boat, and in a few hours you are at the Piræus. Beaumont has told me all about it. He started out a fanatical romanticist; he underwent a transformation while away, and he is now a rigid classicist. He claims that, since the Greeks, humanity has retrograded to a barbaric state, and that our boasted civilization is only a variety of decadence."

Madame d'Ymbercourt was not overflattered by this geographical dissertation, and she considered that Guy de Malivert was a trifle too anxious to avoid compromising her. This careful regard for her reputation, pushed even to the point of flight, was far from satisfactory to her.

"Why should you go to Greece?" she asked; and then added, with a slight blush and an almost imperceptible trembling of the voice: "Besides, is there not a much more simple way to silence these gossipers than to desert your friends and risk your life in a country which is by no means safe, if Edmond About's King of the Mountains is to be accepted as a true picture of affairs there?"

Fearing that she had spoken too clearly, the Countess felt a pink tinge, deeper than the first, spread over her face and neck. Her slightly hurried respiration rattled the jet ornaments of her vest. Then taking courage, she raised to Malivert's face eyes which the light of emotion rendered really beautiful. Madame d'Ymbercourt loved Guy, her too silent adorer, as well as a woman of her nature could love anyone. The studied carelessness with which he tied his cravat pleased her; and with that profound feminine logic, the deductions of which the most subtle philosophers have difficulty in following, she had inferred from this that Malivert possessed all the good qualities requisite to make an excellent husband. But—this future husband marched toward the altar with a very slow step, and did not seem at all pressed to light the torches of Hymen.

Guy understood perfectly well the drift of Madame d'Ymbercourt's remarks; but more than ever did he fear to pledge himself by some imprudent speech, and so he answered: "Doubtless, doubtless; but a trip abroad will cut everything short, and on my return we can decide what is best to be done."

At this cold, vague response, the Countess bit her lips in anger. Guy, greatly embarrassed, said no more, and the situation was becoming strained, when the footman caused a fortunate diversion by announcing:

"The Baron de Féroë!"

CHAPTER IV

THE SPIRIT LIFE

As the Swedish Baron entered the room, Malivert could not repress a slight manifestation of his satisfaction. Never had a call been more happily timed; and he raised his eyes to Monsieur de Féroë with a look full of gratitude. Had it not been for this opportune interruption, Guy would have found himself in a most embarrassing position; he would have been forced to reply to Madame d'Ymbercourt in a categorical fashion; and nothing was so distressing to him as a brutally sincere explanation. He preferred to hold a matter in abeyance rather than to bind himself by a promise; and even in the most trivial matters he was very loath to engage his word. The look which Madame d'Ymbercourt cast upon the Baron was not charged with the same kindly feeling that Malivert's had exhibited; and if the customs of society had not taught her to dissemble her feelings, one might have read in that rapid glance a mixture of reproach, impatience, and anger. The gentleman's provoking appearance had put to flight an opportunity which perhaps might not occur again for a long time, and which it had cost Madame d'Ymbercourt considerable humiliation to obtain; for Guy would most assuredly not seek it, but, on the contrary, carefully avoid it. Although, in critical cases, Guy had given proofs of decision and courage, he was wary of anything that might in one way or another narrow or confine his life. His intelligence would have opened to him all careers, but he was unwilling to adopt any, for the profession chosen might lead him astray from the right path. He was not known to have any tie, except the listless habit of going to the Countess' house oftener than elsewhere, which had given rise to the rumor of his projected marriage. Any kind of bond or obligation inspired in him a strong feeling of revolt; and it seemed as if, impelled thereto by a secret instinct, he were endeavoring to preserve his liberty for some future event.

After the exchange of the first ceremonious speeches—the meaningless remarks which serve as a prelude to a conversation, like the running chords one strikes on a piano before beginning the piece of music to be performed—the Baron, with one of those sudden transitions which lead you, in a couple of phrases, from the fall of Nineveh to the triumph of Gladiateur, began an esthetic and transcendental dissertation upon Wagner's most abstruse operas, The Flying Dutchman, Lohengrin, and Tristam and Iseult. Although Madame d'Ymbercourt played the piano fairly well, and had been one of Herz' most assiduous pupils, she really had no comprehension of music, and especially of music so profound, mysterious, and complicated as that of the mæstro whose Tannhaüser had aroused such violent discussions among her compatriots. While carelessly working on a band of embroidery which she took from a basket placed near the chair in which she usually sat, she replied to the Baron's enthusiastic encomiums with those commonplace objections which are always made to all new music—which were made to Rossini as well as to Wagner—such as lack of rhythm, absence of melody, obscurity, over use of brass, inextricable complication of the orchestration, deafening clamor, and, finally, the absolute impossibility of its execution.

"This is too learned a discussion for me," said Guy de Malivert, rising. "I am but a poor ignoramus in musical matters. I like what strikes me as beautiful; I admire Beethoven, and even Verdi, although I know they are wofully out of fashion. So, as I can throw no light upon the subject, but only ejaculate an occasional Ah! or Humph! like the monk chosen as the arbiter in a philosophical discussion by Molière and Chapelle, I will leave you to your argument."

As he finished speaking, Guy advanced to take leave of Madame d'Ymbercourt. The lady laid her hand in his, but at the same time she gave him a look which said "Remain" as plainly as the reserve of a woman of the world permitted, and this look followed him obliquely to the door, with a shade of sadness which would doubtless have touched him if he had perceived it; but his attention was occupied with the imperiously tranquil countenance of the Swede, who seemed to say to him: "Do not expose yourself anew to the danger from which I have rescued you."

Once in the street, he thought, not without a slight shiver, of the supernatural warning he had received before entering Madame d'Ymbercourt's house, and of the appearance of the Baron de Féroë, which coincided in such a remarkable manner with his disobedience to the mysterious voice. The Baron seemed to him to have been sent to his aid by the occult powers whose presence he vaguely felt about him. Guy de Malivert, without being a confirmed sceptic, was not too easily credulous, and no one had ever seen him present at the meetings of clairvoyants, table-turners, and spirit-rappers. He even felt a sort of disgust at those experiments where spirits are supposed to obey the will of mortals; and he had refused to see the celebrated Home when all Paris for a time went wild over him. Up to the previous evening, he had lived the life of a careless, good-humored bachelor, happy enough to be in the world, in which he played his part with no lack of distinction, and not troubling himself whether or no the planet dragged with it, in its orbit about the sun, an atmosphere peopled with invisible, impalpable beings; yet, this afternoon, he could not refrain from acknowledging that the conditions of his life were changed; a new element, without any invitation from him, was seeking an introduction into his existence, which had hitherto been so peaceful, and from which he had sedulously banished anything of a nature to cause him annoyance or worry. As yet, it was but a trifling matter—a sigh soft as the note of an Æolian harp; a substitution of thoughts in a letter mechanically written; three words breathed in the ear; the encounter with the Swedenborgian Baron, and his solemn and oracular utterances; but it was evident there was some strange influence encircling him—*quærens quem devoret,* as says the Bible in its eternal wisdom.

As he revolved these thoughts in his mind, Malivert reached the Rond-Point of the Champs-Elysées, without having intended to go there rather than anywhere else. His legs had carried him along whither they listed, and he had allowed them to do so. There were very few people abroad. An occasional fanatic, of the kind that exists upon exercising in all weathers, and breaks the ice to bathe in cold water, was returning from the Bois with blue nose and purple cheeks, mounted upon a horse protected by knee-pads. Two or three of these favored Guy with a friendly wave of the hand; and he even received, although he was on foot, a gracious smile from one of the celebrities of the interloping world, who was displaying, in an open carriage, her magnificent furs, the spoils of a season in Russia.

"I am monarch of all I survey, with none to dispute my sway," thought Malivert. "Cora would never have honored me with such a recognition in summer. But what have I come here for? This is not the season for dining under an awning at the Moulin-Rouge, with a Marco or a Baroness d'Ange, and besides, I am in no mood for folly; however, it is time to think of refreshment below the nose, as Rabelais says. There is the sun setting behind the Arc de l'Etoile."

In fact, the arch of that immense gate-way, which opens upon the sky, formed a frame for a picture of oddly shaped clouds, bordered along their broken edges by a frothy line of light. The evening breeze endowed these floating forms with a slight trembling, which lent them a semblance of life, and, as in those illustrations by Gustave Doré, where the thoughts that haunt the brain of the character represented are reflected in the heavens, showing to the Wandering Jew Christ toiling up Calvary, and to Don Quixote knights errant struggling with enchanters, so one could easily have found figures and groups in that luminous mass of vapors. Malivert fancied that he could distinguish angels, with great flame-colored wings, poised above a multitude of shadowy, indistinct figures, struggling together, in a confused jumble, upon a bank of black clouds that looked like a gloomy promontory looming up in the midst of a phosphorescent sea. Now and then one of the lower figures would break loose from the crowd and mount upward toward the bright regions, traversing in its flight the red disk of the sun. When it had reached its destination it would fly for a moment beside one of the angels, and be bathed in radiance. Without doubt, this swirling, changing pageant was an effect of the imagination; and of a picture in the clouds one may say, as Hamlet to Polonius: "Do you see yonder cloud that's almost in shape of a camel? Or like a whale?" and in both cases it is allowable to answer in the affirmative, without being on that account an imbecile sycophant.

The falling shades of night soon extinguished the vaporous phantasmagoria. The jets of gas in the lamp-posts traced, from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de l'Etoile, those two lines of fire which produce a magical effect and are the astonishment of foreigners who enter Paris in the evening by that superb avenue; and Guy de Malivert hailed a passing cab, in which he was transported to the Rue de Choiseul, where was situated the club of which he was a member.

Leaving his overcoat with the liveried servants in the antechamber, he turned over the leaves of the register, where were inscribed the names of those who were to dine there that evening, and saw with a feeling of satisfaction that Baron de Féroë's name was amongst them. He wrote his own beneath, and then passed through the billiard-room—where the melancholy marker was waiting until some of the gentlemen should be seized by a fancy to play a game—and many other lofty, spacious rooms, furnished with every comfort that modern ingenuity could devise, and kept at an even temperature by a powerful furnace, which, however, did not prevent enormous logs from blazing away on the monumental andirons of the broad fireplaces. There were only about half a dozen members of the club lounging on the sofas, or absently turning over the papers and magazines arranged in methodical order upon the green baize of the table in the reading-room—an order which was constantly upset, and as constantly reëstablished. Two or three more were writing love-letters or business epistles upon the paper with the club heading.

It was close upon the dinner hour, and the waiting guests were chatting among themselves until the steward should announce that they were served. Guy began to fear that Baron de Féroë would not come; but as he passed into the dining-room, the Swedish gentleman arrived, and took his place beside him. The dinner, served with a magnificent display of glass, china, and silver, was excellent, and each man washed it down in his own fashion—one with Burgundy, another with champagne, and a third with pale ale, according to his fancy or his custom. One or two of rather pronounced English tastes asked for a glass of sherry or port, which tall footmen in knee-breeches ceremoniously brought them, upon a salver engraved with the monogram of the club. Each followed his own caprice, without worrying about his neighbor; for at the club every man is in his own house. Contrary to his usual habit, Guy did but moderate honor to the dinner. Half of the dishes remained untouched, and the bottle of Chateau Margaux at his side was very slowly emptied.

"There is no need," said Baron de Féroë, "to reproach you, as the white angel did Swedenborg one day, with eating too much. Your moderation this evening is most exemplary, and one would think that you hoped to become more spiritual by fasting."

"I do not know," replied Guy, "if a few mouthfuls more or less would disengage mind from matter, and render more diaphanous the veil which separates invisible things from things visible; but the fact is, I have no appetite. Certain circumstances, of which you apparently are not wholly ignorant, have, I confess, a little shaken me, and caused a preoccupation which is not natural to me. In my normal state, I am not absent-minded at table; but to-day, certain thoughts dominate me, in spite of myself. Have you any plans for this evening, Baron? If you have nothing particular to do, I propose that, after the coffee, we smoke our cigars together in the little music-room, where we shall not be disturbed, unless someone takes a fancy to harass the piano, which is highly improbable. Our musicians are all away this evening at the public rehearsal of the new opera."

The Baron acquiesced most politely to Malivert's proposition, responding graciously that he could not have any better way of passing his time. The two gentlemen therefore established themselves upon the sofa, and at first abandoned themselves to the enjoyment of excellent cigars of *la vuelta de abajo* brand, each thinking, from his point of view, of the strange conversation which was certain to take place between them, and which could not now be long delayed. After an observation or two upon the quality of the tobacco which they were smoking, and the preference that should be accorded to a dark cigar over a light one, the Swedish Baron himself broached the subject which Malivert had been burning to discuss.

"I must, in the first place," he said, "offer you my apologies for the enigmatical advice I ventured to give you the other evening at Madame d'Ymbercourt's; you had not given me your confidence, and it was somewhat indiscreet in me to intrude upon your thoughts without your permission. I should not have done so, for it is not in my nature to exchange my rôle of man of the world for that of magician, if I had not felt a deep interest in you, and if I had not recognized, by signs perceptible only to adepts, that you had recently received a visit from a spirit, or, at all events, that the invisible world was seeking to communicate with you." Guy declared that the Baron had in no way offended him, and that in such a novel situation he was, on the contrary, very glad to encounter a guide who seemed so learned in supernatural things, and whose reputation for honesty and truth was well known to him.

"You understand," responded the Baron, with a slight inclination of the head in acknowledgment of the other's courteous words, "that it is not easy for me to depart from my usual reserve; but you have perhaps seen enough to believe that what we are able to perceive by our senses is not the sum total of everything; and I do not fear, henceforth, if our conversation touches upon mysterious subjects, that you will consider me a visionary. The position I occupy places me above the suspicion of charlatanism; and besides, I yield to the inspection of the world my external life only. I do not ask you what has happened to you, but I see that something beyond the sphere of our ordinary existence is interested in you."

"Yes," said Guy; "I feel that something indefinable has come into my life, and I do not think that I shall commit any indiscretion if I relate to you in detail what you have divined with your remarkable intuition." And he proceeded to inform his companion of the events of the last twenty-four hours.

The Swedish Baron, stroking his pale yellow mustache, listened with absorbed attention, but without manifesting the slightest symptom of surprise. When Guy had finished, he was silent for a moment, and appeared to be profoundly reflecting; then, as if in one sentence he was summing up a whole train of thought, he said, suddenly:

"Monsieur de Malivert, has any young girl ever died for love of you?"

"No, indeed," responded Guy, emphatically; "at least, none that I am aware of. I have not conceit enough to think that I could inspire such a depth of despair. My love affairs, if I can so designate a careless kiss or two, have been very peaceful, and not in the least romantic—vows as lightly broken as made; and, to avoid scenes of recrimination, of which I have a horror, I have always arranged it so that I should be the one betrayed and forsaken; my vanity willingly made that little sacrifice to my comfort. So I do not think that I have left behind me in my life many inconsolable Ariadnes; in the little stories of Parisian mythology, the arrival of Bacchus invariably precedes the departure of Theseus. Besides, I must confess, even if I give you a very poor opinion of my powers of affection, that I have never felt for anyone that intense, exclusive, overpowering passion of which everyone speaks—without having experienced it, perhaps. No being has ever inspired me with the idea of binding myself with an indissoluble tie, or ever made me dream of those projects of two lives in one, and those flights to one of those paradises of azure, light, and perfume which love, they say, knows how to construct, even in a hovel or a garret."

"That is no proof, my dear Guy, that you are incapable of love. There are many varieties of love, and doubtless, in that place where the fate of souls is decided, you have been reserved for a lofty destiny. But there is yet time; the consent of the will can alone give the spirits power over us. You are standing upon the threshold of a boundless, vast, mysterious world, full of illusions and shadows, where contend good and evil influences, which you must learn to distinguish; in that world are to be seen marvels enough to dethrone human reason. No one returns from the depths of this abyss without bearing upon his countenance a pallor never to be effaced; the eye of the flesh can not contemplate with impunity what is reserved for the eye of the soul; these journeys beyond our sphere cause inexpressible weariness of mind and body, and inspire at the same time an overpowering sentiment of nostalgia. Pause before it is too late; do not pass from one world into the other, and do not answer the call which seeks to draw you outside of this material life. Those who conjure up spirits are safe within that circle which they trace around themselves, and which the spirits can not pass. Let reality represent for you this circle; do not step beyond it, for then your power ceases. You see that, although a high-priest of the cult, I do not seek to proselytize."

"Have I, then, anything to fear," asked Malivert, "from dangerous adventures in this invisible world which surrounds us, and whose existence is revealed to but a small number of privileged persons?"

"No," answered the Baron; "nothing appreciable to the human eye will happen to you, but the peace of your heart and mind may be deeply and eternally disturbed."

"Is the spirit, that does me the honor to be interested in me, of a dangerous nature?"

"It is, on the contrary, a spirit of sympathy, benevolence, and love. I have met it in a place of light and radiance. But a contemplation of the heavens will cause vertigo as well as a look down into an abyss. Remember the story of the shepherd who fell in love with a star."

"And yet," said Malivert, "the words you said to me at Madame d'Ymbercourt's seemed to warn me to beware of any earthly engagement."

"I was forced to speak as I did," replied the Baron; "I felt that I must advise you to remain free, in case you had responded to the manifestations of the spirit; but since you have not done so yet, you are of course still your own master; perhaps the best course you could pursue would be to remain so, and to continue your usual course of life."

"And marry Madame d'Ymbercourt, for example?" suggested Guy, with an ironical smile.

"Why not?" rejoined the Baron. "She is young and handsome, and I have seen in her eyes a look of real sorrow at your persistent coldness. It would not be impossible that a soul should be born within her."

"That is a risk that I do not care to run. I understand your motives, my dear Baron, in attempting to persuade me to continue to lead a commonplace existence. But I have fewer ties than one at first sight would believe. Although I may have arranged my life in the most pleasant and comfortable manner possible, that does not prove any great attachment to the pleasures of the senses. In fact, I am really at heart thoroughly indifferent to the material things of this life. If I have considered it better form to appear gay and careless, rather than to affect a romantic and ill-bred melancholy, it does not follow that the world as it exists delights and satisfies me. It is true that I do not discuss, before a circle of pretentious women, love, passion, the ideal, but I have kept my heart free from any vulgar idol, spotless and pure for the advent of the unknown god."

While Malivert was speaking with more fire than men of the world are apt to speak in these days, Baron de Féroë's eyes sparkled, and his countenance assumed an expression of enthusiasm which it was his custom to conceal beneath a mask of icy indifference. It afforded him supreme satisfaction to see Guy resist prosaic temptation and abandon the flesh for the spirit.

"Well, my dear Guy," he said, "since your resolve can not be shaken, return home; you probably will receive new communications. I must remain here. I won a hundred livres yesterday from d'Aversac, and I owe him his revenge."

"The rehearsal of the opera must be over, for I hear our friends humming in their falsest voice the airs which they have not succeeded in retaining."

"Escape, before the hubbub upsets your nerves."

Guy pressed the Baron's hand, and, leaving the club, entered his carriage, which was waiting before the door.

Chapter V

THE MIRROR REVEALS

Guy de Malivert returned home fully decided to tempt his fate. Although he did not appear to be romantic, he was so, nevertheless; but a certain feeling of sensitive reserve forced him to hide his sentiments, and he asked of the world no more than he gave in return. The relations which connected him with society were agreeable enough so far as they went, and his ties were in no way galling, and could always be broken at his will; still, his heart dreamed of a happiness which as yet he had never encountered.

In obedience to what the Baron de Féroë had told him at the club of the effort of will necessary to bring spirits from the depths of the invisible world to the limits of this, Malivert summoned up all the strength of his being and concentrated his thoughts upon the desire to enter into more direct communication with the mysterious spirit which he felt was near him, and which would probably not resist the summons, since of its own accord it had attempted to manifest itself to him.

This done, Malivert, who was in the same room in which we found him at the beginning of this story, watched and listened with the most extreme attention, for—he scarcely knew what. At first he neither saw nor heard anything, and yet the lifeless objects which filled the apartment—the statuettes, pictures, old carved buffets, exotic curiosities, weapons, and arms—appeared to him to assume strange and unusual aspects. The lights and shadows projected by the lamp lent them a fantastic life. A grotesque figure of green china seemed grinning from ear to ear with a senile grimace, and a Venus of Milo, whose exquisite contours were displayed against a dark background, spitefully distended her proud nostrils and curved disdainfully her arched lips. The Chinese god and the Greek goddess alike disapproved of Malivert's undertaking—at all events, one might have believed so from the intelligent expression of their faces. Involuntarily Malivert's eyes, as if entreated to do so by some secret voice, turned toward a Venetian mirror hung against a tapestry of Cordova leather.

It was one of those mirrors of the last century, such as are frequently seen in the pictures of Longhi, the Watteau of Venetian decadence, and as are still to be found in some of the bric-a-brac shops of the Ghetto. The beveled glass was encased in a frame of polished crystal, surmounted by garlands of flowers and leaves of the same material, which, against the smooth, dark background of the tapestry, sometimes looked like dull silver and sometimes launched forth prismatic rays from their facets. In the midst of this sparkling surrounding, the glass, of small dimensions, like all Venetian mirrors, appeared of a bluish-black, of fathomless depth, and as if it were an opening upon a space of boundless extent, filled with fantastic shadows.

It was an odd thing, but none of the objects opposite were reflected in it; one would have said that it was one of those theatrical glasses which the scene-painter covers with indistinct and neutral tints to prevent the reflection of the auditorium.

A vague instinct warned Malivert that if any revelation was to take place that evening, it would be by means of this mirror, which, as a rule, he rarely noticed, but which now exercised over him a sort of fascination and invincibly compelled his regard. But although he kept his eyes fixed upon it, he could distinguish nothing upon the black surface, the mysterious density of which was intensified by the crystal ornamentation. At last, however, it seemed to him that in the shadowy gloom appeared a faint, milky-white vapor, like a distant, quivering light which was gradually approaching. He turned his head to see what object in the chamber had caused this reflection, but could perceive nothing. Although Guy was brave, and had proved it on more than one occasion, he could not control a certain feeling of fear, and the little shiver, of which Job speaks, ran over his flesh. This time, of his own free will and with a full knowledge of the consequences, he was about to cross the formidable threshold. He had set his foot outside the circle which nature has traced about mankind, and his life would probably be thrown out of its orbit and henceforth revolve about an unknown point. Although sceptics might ridicule it, no step could be more serious, and Guy fully realized all the importance of it; but, nevertheless, an irresistible fascination drew him on, and he continued obstinately to keep his eyes fixed upon the Venetian mirror. What was he going to see? Under what aspect would the spirit appear and render itself perceptible to human vision? Would it be an agreeable or a terrible figure, bringing joy or horror? Although the light in the mirror had not yet assumed any distinct shape, Guy was confident that it would be a feminine spirit. The sigh which he had heard the evening before echoed too tenderly in his heart to allow his entertaining any other ideal. Had the spirit ever belonged to the earth? Would it come from a higher region, or from some distant planet? Those were points he could know nothing of, and yet, from the question put to him by Baron de Féroë, he thought that it must be a soul which had passed through the conditions of this terrestrial existence, and that an attraction, the nature of which he would doubtless learn later, drew it toward its former sphere.

The luminous spot in the mirror was beginning to take a clearer form, and to be tinted with a color which was faint and immaterial, so to speak, and which would have made the tints of the freshest palette appear coarse. It was rather the suggestion of a color than the color itself—a vapor flushed with light, and so delicately shaded that all human words would be powerless to describe it. Guy gazed in breathless suspense, a prey to the most intense emotion. The image became gradually more and more condensed, without, however, attaining the coarse, material substance of reality, and Guy at last could see, bordered by the crystal ornamentation, like a picture in its frame, the head of a young girl, so beautiful that all mortal beauty would pale and seem only a shadow in comparison. A pale, roseate hue faintly tinged the cheeks of the face where the lights and shades were but dimly defined, and which did not need any such contrast to bring out the features, as earthly faces do. The hair, of the tint of a saint's aureole, rippled in a golden mist above the low, white forehead. The half-lowered eyes, of a deep, dark blue, wore an expression of infinite gentleness and sweetness, recalling those places in the sky where, at twilight, seem to bloom clusters of violets. The nose was ideally delicate and refined, and a smile like that of the Mona Lisa of Leonardo da Vinci, but with more tenderness and less irony, curved the exquisitely chiseled lips; the flexible neck, like the stem of a flower, was bent forward, and faded away into the silvery mist behind.

This feeble sketch, made, necessarily, with words created to describe the things of our world, can give only a very vague idea of the apparition which Guy de Malivert contemplated in the Venetian mirror. Did he see it with the eye of the flesh, or with the eye of the soul? Was the image really there, and would a person who was not in the same nervous and peculiarly susceptible state as Guy have been able to perceive it? This is difficult to determine; but at all events, what he saw, although of the same nature, was by no means the same thing as what passes, in this life, for the face of a beautiful woman. The features were indeed the same; but they were purified, transfigured, idealized, and rendered perceptible by a substance in a certain sense immaterial, having only the density indispensable to be visible, in the thick, terrestrial atmosphere, to eyes from which the scales had not yet fallen. The spirit, or the soul, which had revealed itself to Guy de Malivert, had unquestionably borrowed the shape of its former perishable envelope, but such as it might be in a finer, more ethereal place, where can live only the phantoms of things, and not the things themselves. The vision filled Guy with unspeakable rapture; the sensation of fear which he had felt at first was dissipated, and he abandoned himself unreservedly to the strange novelty of the situation, questioning nothing, accepting everything, and determined to find the supernatural natural. He approached the glass, thinking that by so doing he could see more distinctly the features of the image; but it remained as it had at first appeared, very near, and yet very far, seeming like the reflection upon the inner side of the mirror of a face placed at a distance too great for a human mind to measure. The real presence of what he saw, if one can use such an expresssion under such circumstances, was evidently in unknown regions, far away, inaccessible to the living, and across the borders of which even the boldest would scarcely dare to venture. Guy vainly endeavored to remember if he had ever seen the face before, upon any living being; it was entirely new to him, and yet he seemed to recognize it; but where had he seen it? It was certainly not in this sublunary and terraqueous world.

This was the shape, then, in which it pleased *Spirite* to appear; for Guy de Malivert, not knowing what name to give to the apparition seen in the glass, had baptized it "Spirite," until he should know what appelation was more appropriate. It seemed to him, soon, that the image was fading away and vanishing into the depths of the mirror; in a few moments it was no more than the light vapor of a breath, and then this vapor itself was effaced. The complete disappearance of the apparition was marked by the sudden reflection of the gilded frame of a picture which hung on the wall opposite; the mirror had recovered its reflexive properties.

When he was quite sure that the apparition would not appear again, at least that evening, and in the same manner, Guy threw himself down in an arm-chair; although the silvery chime of the clock, striking two, warned him that it was fully time to go to bed, he could not make up his mind to do so. And yet he felt fatigued; the new and strange emotions he had experienced—the first steps taken outside of the real world—had caused him a nervous lassitude, which put sleep to flight; and, moreover, he feared if he should lose consciousness, he would miss some manifestation of Spirite.

With his legs stretched out and his feet resting upon the fender before the fire, which had suddenly blazed up, apparently of its own accord, Guy reflected on all that had happened to him, the possibility of which he would assuredly have denied two days before. He thought of that lovely face, which recalled—only to cause them to be forgotten as vain shadows—the visions of beauty conjured up by the imagination of poets, the genius of painters, and the magical powers of dream-land. He found in Spirite a thousand nameless fascinations, a thousand attractions, which neither nature nor art could unite in one type, and from this specimen he formed a high opinion of the population of the other world. Then he wondered what strange sympathy, what mysterious and hitherto unavowed affinity could attract toward him, from the depths of the infinite, this angel, sylph, soul, spirit, of the very essence of which, and to what immaterial order it belonged, he was in ignorance.

He did not dare to flatter himself that he had inspired with love a being of so superior a nature, for conceit was not one of Malivert's faults, and yet he was forced to recognize that Spirite, by the sigh she had breathed, by the letter the sense of which she had changed, by the warning murmured at Madame d'Ymbercourt's door, and by the words of the Swedish Baron, which were doubtless due to her influence, apparently felt for him, Guy de Malivert, a simple mortal, a sentiment of a thoroughly feminine nature, which in this world would be called jealousy. What he did understand at once, however, was that he was madly, desperately, irrevocably in love, and his whole being was suddenly invaded by a passion which eternity could not destroy.

From that moment all the women he had ever known were effaced from his memory. At Spirite's appearance he had forgotten terrestrial love, as Romeo forgot Rosalind when he saw Juliet. It was not without a certain terror that he felt himself attacked by that sudden flame which devoured all thought, all will, all resistance, and left living in heart and brain naught but love; but it was too late—he was no longer his own master. The Baron de Féroë was right; it is a formidable thing to cross, living, the barriers of life, and to venture, an opaque body, among shadows, without having in one's hand the golden rod which compel obedience from phantoms.

A horrible idea crossed Malivert's brain. Suppose Spirite should take a caprice not to reappear, by what means could he bring her back? And if there were no means in existence, how could he endure the darkness after having, for an instant even, contemplated the real light? He felt as if some terrible misfortune had happened to him, and for an instant, which seemed an eternity, he was overwhelmed with the utmost despair. At this supposition, which was really without any basis, that he might never see Spirite again, the tears mounted to his eyes, quivered upon his lids, and although he made an effort to restrain them, ashamed to display such weakness even before himself alone, finally overflowed and rolled slowly down his cheeks. Suddenly, to his surprise and delight, he felt a veil finer than the most delicate tissues woven of the air in a fairy loom, pass over his face, and brush away the bitter drops. The light contact of a moth's wings could not have been more dainty. It was no illusion, for the touch was repeated three times, and, his tears dried, Malivert fancied he could see floating in the shadow. like a little cloud in the heavens, a diaphanous, white film.

After this tender exhibition of sympathy, he could not doubt but that Spirite, who seemed to be always invisibly near him, would answer his appeal, and, with the power which belonged to her more exalted sphere, find easy methods of communication. She could come into the world which he inhabited, at least as much as a spirit can mingle with the living; but it was forbidden to him, a mortal, weighed down by the flesh, to follow her into the unknown, ideal regions to which she belonged.

When we say that Malivert passed from the most sombre despair to the purest rapture, we shall surprise no one. If a simple mortal can ten times a day alternately cast you down into the infernal regions and raise you to paradise, inspiring you now with the desire to blow your brains out, and now with the idea of purchasing a villa on the shores of Lake Como to hide your happiness there forever, surely the emotions produced by a spirit can be no less poignant.

If Guy's passion for Spirite seems very sudden, it must be remembered that love at first sight is by no means impossible; that a woman gazed at from a distance through an opera-glass produces about the same effect as a faint reflection in a mirror, and that many serious passions have had no more startling origins; moreover, in Guy's case the love was less sudden than it appeared to be. For a long time, Spirite, although invisible, had been close to him, preparing his heart, without his suspecting it, for supernatural communications; suggesting to him, in the midst of the worldly frivolity about him, thoughts which were far above and beyond his surroundings; creating in him a thirst for the ideal, a longing for a better and higher life; turning him aside from trivial love affairs and inspiring him with a consciousness that there was a happiness which the world could not give him. It was she who had broken the fibres of all webs which women had sought to spin about him; who had revealed to him the folly or the perfidy of such or such a woman, in whom he had been for the time being more or less interested; and who, up to the present time, had kept his heart free from any indissoluble entanglement. She had arrested him just as he was about to take an irreparable step, for Guy's life was approaching a crisis; although there was no outward and visible indication of the fact, the "fatal three" were weighing his lot in the scales; and that was what had determined Spirite to depart from the darkness whence she had watched over him, and to manifest herself to Guy, whom occult influences were no longer powerful enough to direct. What was the motive of her interest in him? Was Spirite acting of her own free will, or in obedience to an order emanating from that radiant sphere where, according to Dante, one can do whatever one wishes? She alone was able to reveal that, and perhaps she will reveal it soon.

Finally, Malivert went to bed, and was soon in the Land of Nod. His sleep was light, and filled with marvelous fancies, not exactly of the character of a dream, but rather of a vision. There opened before his eyes vast extents of space, where, upon an azure background, wavy ribbons of light formed valleys of gold and silver, which stretched away into the boundless distance; then this picture disappeared, to give place to broad torrents of blinding phosphorescence, like a cascade of liquefied suns, which fell from eternity into the infinite; the cascade vanished in its turn, and was replaced by an arched sky of that intense and luminous white which clothed the figures in the transfiguration upon Mount Tabor. Upon this sky, which one might have believed to be the very acme of splendor, burned, here and there, starry points —rays still more vivid, scintillations still more intense. This burst of light, against which the most brilliant stars would have appeared as if carved in ebony, seemed like a presage of eternity. From time to time, across the luminous arch passed, like birds before the disk of the sun, spirits, discernible not by their shadow, but by their different quality of light. Amidst the swarm Guy thought that he recognized Spirite, and he was not mistaken, although she appeared only as a radiant point in space, as a globule upon the incandescent resplendence.

Spirite herself was the instigator of this dream, as she wished to display herself to her adorer in her true sphere. The soul, freed during sleep from the captivity of the body, reveled in this vision, and for some minutes Guy was permitted to see with the eye of the spirit, not the other world itself, the contemplation of which is permitted only to souls entirely released from the thralldom of the flesh, but a ray filtering beneath the gates ajar, as one sees in a sombre street, under the door of a palace illuminated within, a gleam of light which conjures up an idea of the splendor of the festivities beyond. In a short time, however, Spirite, not wishing to fatigue too much Malivert's human organization, dispersed the vision, and plunged him from ecstacy into ordinary sleep. As he returned to the darkness of commonplace dreams, he felt as if he were being enclosed in a black marble sarcophagus, amidst a gloom of impenetrable density; then all was blotted out, even this sensation, and for hours he lay in that balmy unconsciousness from which one awakens to life brighter, fresher, and younger.

He slept until ten o'clock, and then Jack, who was watching for his master's awakening, seeing that his eyes were open, pushed back the half-closed door, entered the chamber, drew aside the curtains, and, advancing to Malivert's bedside, presented a silver salver on which lay two letters which had arrived that morning. One was from Madame d'Ymbercourt, and the other from Baron de Féroë. Guy opened the Baron's first.

Chapter VI

SLEIGHING

Baron de Feroe's letter contained only these words: "Has Cæsar crossed the Rubicon?" That of Madame d'Ymbercourt was much less brief, and hinted, through many tortuous sentences, that it would be better not to pay too much attention to idle gossip, and that to suddenly cut short the customary visits would be perhaps more compromising than to increase them. The whole concluded with an allusion to Adelina Patti—a sort of suggestion to Malivert that a place would be reserved for him in Box 22 at the Italiens. Guy unquestionably warmly admired the great diva, but, in his present state of mind, he preferred to hear her another evening and he resolved to invent some excuse for his non-appearance.

There is in the human mind a tendency to doubt extraordinary events, when the place where they have occurred has resumed its customary aspect; and therefore Malivert, as he looked, in the broad light of day, into the Venetian mirror, gleaming bluely in the midst of its crystal frame, and saw only the reflection of his own face, wondered if it were really true that only a few hours before that bit of polished glass had presented to him the most exquisite image that the eye of mortal had ever beheld. It was to no purpose that his reason attributed this celestial vision to a dream, a mirage of the brain; his heart gave the lie to his reason. Difficult as it is to appreciate the reality of the supernatural, he felt that it was all true, and that behind the apparent tranquility that reigned about him there hovered a whole world of mystery. Yet, nothing was changed in his apartments, and a visitor would have noticed nothing peculiar; but henceforth the door of every sideboard, every desk, would suggest to Guy an opening upon the infinite. He started and trembled at every sound, lest it might be some warning or communication from the other world.

To escape from the nervous excitement he felt stealing over him, he resolved to take a long drive; he felt confident that Spirite's appearances would be nocturnal, and, moreover, if she had any communication to make to him, her strange ubiquity would furnish her with means to find him and manifest herself to him wherever he might be. In this love affair, if such a term may be used to describe anything so indefinite, frail, ethereal, impalpable, Malivert's part was necessarily a passive one. The ideal mistress of his heart could at any moment enter his world, but it was impossible for him to follow her into the shadowy regions where she abode.

It had snowed the night before; and, a rare thing in Paris, the white covering of the earth had not melted beneath the rays of a warm sun, into that cold, gruel-like substance which is even worse than the black mud of the old streets or the yellow mire of the macadamized boulevards; the crisp frost had crystalized it, and it crackled like broken glass beneath the wheels of the carriages and the feet of the pedestrians. Grymalkin was a good trotter, and Malivert had brought from Saint Petersburg a sleigh and a complete Russian harness. Opportunities for sleighing are not frequent in the mild climate of Paris, and when they do occur, lovers of the sport seize upon them with enthusiasm. Guy was proud of his turnout, which was by all odds the most faultless in Paris, and indeed might have appeared with honor upon the banks of the Neva. He had acquired, during a rigorous winter passed in Russia, a taste for the northern delights of ice and cold, and he loved to glide over the sparkling, snowy expanse, slightly marked by the steel of the runners, guiding with both hands, after the fashion of the *ivoschtchiks*, a horse of beauty and speed. To-day the thought of a rapid rush through the bracing, healthy air was peculiarly attractive to him; so he ordered his sleigh to be harnessed, and had soon reached the Place de la Concorde and the Champs-Elysées. The conditions were not so favorable as they would have been on the Newsky Perspective; but the snow was thick enough to allow the sleigh to move smoothly on without many unpleasant jerks. It would not have been fair to expect in Paris the perfection of a Muscovite winter; and yet, in the Bois de Boulogne, one might easily have fancied oneself in the *Isles,* so white and smooth was the snow, especially in the side avenues, which are less frequented by carriages and equestrians. Malivert entered a road which passed through a little wood of fir-trees whose brown branches, laden with snow which the wind had not disturbed, recalled to him his excursions in Russia. He was abundantly supplied with furs, and the keen wind seemed to him but a gentle zephyr in comparison with the mercury-freezing temperature he had faced in the North.

There was a considerable crowd gathered on the borders of the lake, and the crush of carriages was as great as in the most beautiful days of spring or autumn, when races between the most celebrated stars of the turf attract to Longchamp curiosity seekers of all ranks and fortunes. Lying back amidst the soft cushions of their comfortable carriages, beneath white bear-skin robes edged with scarlet, were women of the highest rank and position, pressing against their fur-lined mantles their warm, sable muffs. Majestically seated upon the boxes, draped with heavy cloth and loaded with passementerie, the dignified coachmen, their shoulders protected by capes of fox-fur, regarded, with a glance no less disdainful than that of their mistresses, the yellow-haired damsels driving, themselves, ponies attached to extravagant and brilliantly painted vehicles. There were also many closed carriages, for, in Paris, the idea of driving out in an open carriage with the thermometer hovering about zero is altogether too arctic and boreal. A certain number of sleighs were noticeable among the multitude of wheeled vehicles, but Malivert's took the palm from them all. Several Russian gentlemen who were lounging about, as contented as reindeer in the snow, deigned to signify their approval of the graceful shape of the *douga,* and the perfect manner in which the various parts of the handsome harness were adjusted.

It was about three o'clock; along the horizon a slight fog was beginning to form, and against the gray background the slender branches of the denuded trees stood out like the filaments of desiccated leaves. A rayless sun, like a round splash of red wax, was descending into the clouds.

The lake was covered with skaters. Three or four days of freezing weather had thickened the ice sufficiently to make it capable of bearing the weight of the crowd. The snow had been swept off and piled up on the banks, and the bluish, gleaming surface of the ice which was left exposed was marked in all directions by the sharp edges of the skates, like a mirror in an inn parlor, where innumerable pairs of lovers have scratched their names with the point of a diamond. Near the bank were men with skates to let, for the use of the clerks and shop-boys whose falls served as comic interludes to the winter's fête—this species of ballet from "The Prophet" executed on a grand scale. In the middle of the lake, fancy skaters, in trim costumes, displayed their skill; spinning along with lightning-like speed, suddenly changing their course, avoiding collisions, stopping short by a dig of the heel into the ice, describing curves, spirals, figure eights, or tracing letters, like the Arabian horsemen, who, with the point of their spurs, write against the grain the name of Allah upon the flank of their steeds. Some pushed before them light, fancifully ornamented sledges, tenanted by beautiful women swathed in furs, who, intoxicated with the cold and the swift motion, looked up laughingly into the faces of their guides. Others skated hand in hand with fashionable girls, whose heads were crowned with Russian or Hungarian caps, and who wore braided jackets edged with silver fox and skirts of brilliant colors half looped up over tiny varnished boots, crossed by the straps of the skates as with the bands of a cothurnus. Others still, in a trial of speed, glided upon one foot, leaning forward like Hippomenes and Atalanta in the group under the chestnut-trees of the gardens of the Tuileries. The way to win the race to-day, as in antiquity, would have been, perhaps, to cast apples of gold before these Atalantas costumed by Worth.

The ever-changing kaleidoscope of rich and original costumes—a sort of masked ball upon the ice—formed a graceful, animated, and charming spectacle, worthy of the brush of Wateau, Lancret, or Baron. Certain groups recalled vividly those designs above the door of old châteaux, where winter is represented by gallants pushing in swan-shaped sledges dainty marquises in black velvet masks, who use their muffs as receptacles for love-letters. To be sure, there were no masks upon these pretty faces flushed with the frosty air, but the half-veils, sprinkled with steel or fringed with jet, formed no mean substitute.

Malivert had stopped his sleigh near the lake, and was watching the amusing and picturesque scene, the principal actors in which were so well known to him that he could easily distinguish the love affairs and flirtations which were going on among them. It was no difficulty for him to pick out the chief personages of the comedy from the crowd of supernumeraries, without which no spectacle is complete, and whose chief service seems to be to prevent the action of the play being too clear and bald. But he contemplated it all with eyes which henceforth could find no interest in such scenes, and he even noticed without the slightest feeling of jealousy, a very charming young person, who had once been most kind to him, leaning in a manner that was almost affectionate upon the arm of a handsome skater.

It was not long before he gathered up the reins from the back of Grymalkin, who had been stamping impatiently in the snow, turned his head toward Paris, and commenced descending the avenue of the lake, which was a continual parade of carriages, where the bystanders had the pleasure of seeing pass and repass, ten or twelve times in the course of an hour, the same yellow-bodied chariot bearing a solemn dowager, and the same little coupé at the window of which appears a Havanese poodle and a damsel with banged hair—a pleasure which they seem never to weary of. As Guy turned into the crowded avenue, he was forced to moderate the speed of his horse, through fear of running over somebody, and, besides, fast driving is not considered good form in this fashionable thoroughfare. He had not proceeded far, when he saw coming toward him a well-known equipage which he would have preferred to avoid, and did not expect to meet. Madame d'Ymbercourt was rather a chilly being and Guy never supposed that she would venture out with the thermometer below zero, in which he showed his scant knowledge of women; for no temperature could prevent them from going to a place where fashion demands that they should be seen. Now, it was considered, this winter, the proper thing to appear in the Bois and drive around the frozen lake—a meeting-place, between three and five o'clock, of *all Paris,* to use the words of society reporters; and no woman of any prominence whatever in the social world could afford to have her name omitted from the list of the beauties of the day published in the fashionable journals. Madame d'Ymbercourt was in possession of sufficient wealth, beauty, and position to believe herself obliged to conform to the rites of fashion, and she therefore undertook, shivering a little under her wealth of furs, the pilgrimage of the lake. Malivert longed to let Grymalkin forge ahead at the top of his speed, and the horse would have liked nothing better; but Madame d'Ymbercourt had perceived him, and he was forced to rein in his sleigh beside her carriage.

He was talking to her on general and indifferent subjects, alleging a large dinner which would end very late, to avoid the visit to the Italiens, when suddenly he was startled by the looming up of another sleigh which almost brushed against his own. This sleigh was drawn by a magnificent horse of the Orloff breed, iron-gray, with a white mane and one of those tails that seem to be formed of threads of silver. Kept in check by a heavily bearded Russian coachman, in a caftan of green cloth and a velvet cap bordered with astrakhan, he chafed proudly beneath the curb, and stepped so high that his nostrils seemed to touch his knees. The elegance of the turnout, the style of the coachman, and the beauty of the horse attracted Guy's attention; but his feelings can better be imagined than described, when, in the lady seated in the corner of the sleigh, and whom he had taken at first for one of those Russian princesses who come for one or two seasons to startle Paris with their wealth and eccentricity—if Paris can be startled at anything—he recognized, or thought he recognized, a face he had gazed upon but once, and which was henceforth indelibly engraven upon his heart, but which he certainly did not expect to encounter in the Bois de Boulogne, after having seen it appear, like Helen to Faust, in a sort of magic mirror.

At sight of her, he started so violently that Grymalkin, feeling a nervous twitch upon the reins, bounded forward. Guy, shouting a few words of excuse to Madame d'Ymbercourt for the impatience of his horse that he declared himself unable to control, began to follow the sleigh, whose pace had also quickened.

As if surprised at being followed, the lady half turned her head and looked over her shoulder to see who had dared commit this boldness; and although Guy could see only her profile, and that not completely, he managed to catch a glimpse, through the folds of her veil, of a mass of rippling gold hair, a dark-blue eye, and upon the cheek that delicate rose-colored tint which only the snows of lofty peaks tinged by the rays of the setting sun can give even a distant idea of. In her ear was a turquoise, and over the part of the neck which was visible between her mantle and the brim of her hat wandered a little stray curl, fine and silky as the hair of a child. It was indeed the vision of the previous night, but invested with that degree of reality which a phantom must perforce assume in broad daylight and near the lake of the Bois de Boulogne. How did it happen that Spirite was there, clothed in a form so humanly charming, and doubtless visible to others beside himself? for it was difficult to believe, even while admitting the intangibility of the apparition, that the coachman, the horse and the sleigh were shadows. This was a question, however, which Guy did not pause to consider; but, to assure himself that he was not deceived by one of those chance resemblances which disappear upon closer scrutiny, he tried to pass the sleigh, in order to see the full face of the mysterious lady. He touched Grymalkin with the whip, and the animal shot forward like an arrow, and for some moments his breath, in jets of white vapor, clouded the back of the forward sleigh; but although he was a brave horse, Grymalkin was no match for the Russian steed—the finest specimen of the race, perhaps, that Malivert had ever seen. The coachman in the caftan made a slight clicking sound with his tongue, and the iron-gray horse, in a few impetuous strides, had soon distanced Grymalkin, and placed between the two sleighs a space sufficient to reassure his mistress, if indeed she were in the least alarmed.

Evidently, the lady who bore so strong a resemblance to Spirite had no idea of humiliating Malivert too deeply, and so cause him to give up the pursuit in despair, for her sleigh soon took a more moderate pace. The two vehicles had now reached the avenue of firs, which happened to be unobstructed by any carriage, and the chase therefore had a free course. Still Grymalkin could not overtake the steed of the Orloff race. His utmost efforts only succeeded in keeping the distance between one sleigh and the other about the same. The iron-clad hoofs of the horses sent flying through the air flaky lumps of snow, which were ground into an icy powder against the high, varnished dash-boards, and the white steam produced by the breathing of the splendid animals enveloped them in clouds of mist. At the extreme end of the avenue, where it joined the highway, the two sleighs were for an instant side by side, and as at this moment the wind blew aside her veil, Guy could see for a second or two the face of the fictitious Russian. A smile of celestial mischief played about her lips, the curves of which followed the same lines as those of the mouth of the Mona Lisa. Her eyes sparkled with the azure radiance of sapphires, and a delicate, misty rose color tinted her velvety cheeks. It was but for a moment, however, and then Spirite, for it was indeed she, lowered her veil, and the coachman spoke to his horse, who at the word sprung forward with terrible impetuosity. Guy uttered a cry of horror, for at the same time a heavy barouche crossed the road, and forgetting that Spirite was an incorporeal being, impervious to any terrestrial mishap, he believed that a frightful accident was inevitable; but as if traversing a bank of fog, horse, coachman, and sleigh passed through and beyond the barouche, and soon Malivert lost them from sight; he started and shuddered, and his legs, usually so steady, shook with nervous tremblings. The instinct of animals is profound and mysterious; they frequently see what escapes the heedless eye of man, and it seems as if many of them recognize the presence of the supernatural. Grymalkin was soon reassured, however, as he joined on the borders of the lake the procession of real equipages.

As he descended the Avenue de l'Impératrice, Guy met Baron de Féroë, who was also returning from the Bois in a light droschki. After asking of Malivert fire to light his cigar, the Baron said, with an air half mysterious, half bantering: "I am afraid that Madame d'Ymbercourt will not be very much pleased at your conduct; what a scene she will treat you to at the Italiens this evening, if you are imprudent enough to go there! For I don't think that steeple-chase you indulged in was very much to her taste. By the way, you had best tell Jack to throw a blanket over Grymalkin, unless you wish him to catch cold."

Chapter VII

THE NARROW HAND

Abnormal occurrences no longer had any power to startle Guy, and he did not consider it in the least extraordinary that a sleigh should pass bodily through a carriage. The ease in overcoming obstacles that would have broken to pieces material vehicles demonstrated beyond a doubt that this was a chimerical equipage belonging to the stables of the mist, and which must, perforce, have carried none other than Spirite.

Unquestionably, Spirite was jealous, or, at all events, all her actions proved that she desired to separate Malivert from Madame d'Ymbercourt, and the means she employed were certainly good; for as he turned the Rond-Point de l'Etoile, Guy saw the Countess' carriage approaching, and the lady seemed to be listening with a very indulgent air to the presumably flattering words poured into her ear by Monsieur d'Aversac, who was walking his horse close to the carriage door.

"She is taking her revenge for the affair of the sleigh," thought Malivert, "but I am not a man to be piqued into jealousy. D'Aversac makes the same pretense to wit that Madame d'Ymbercourt does to beauty, without either of them possessing the real article. They are admirably suited to one another, and a match between them would be an excellent thing. However, it is all a matter of supreme indifference to me, as the affairs of this world no longer concern me."

Madame d'Ymbercourt's little bit of strategy, therefore, failed of its effect. When she caught sight of Guy, she had leaned forward in a most gracious manner to respond to Monsieur d'Aversac's compliments. The poor Countess thought that she could win back her quondam adorer by wounding his vanity. Although she had caught but a glimpse of Spirite, she divined that there had arisen in her a formidable rival. The eagerness of Guy, who was ordinarily so self-possessed, to follow the mysterious sleigh containing the woman whom no one had ever encountered in the Bois before, wounded her to the quick; for she did not give the least credence to his hasty excuses and his statement that Grymalkin was beyond his control. If d'Aversac had been a wise man, instead of being puffed up with conceit, he would have attributed the unusual graciousness with which he was treated to its real cause—feminine spite. But, on the contrary, he accepted it as due to his own merit, and with great magnanimity, pitied that poor Malivert who had been too confident of Madame d'Ymbercourt's affection; and the gentleman, in his conceit, aided, it must be confessed, somewhat by appearances, proceeded to build innumerable air-castles upon the little event.

That evening Guy dined at a house where the invitation had been given so long beforehand that it was impossible for him not to be present. Fortunately, there were many guests, and his preoccupation passed unnoticed. When the dinner was over, he exchanged a few words with his hostess, and then managed a skillful retreat to another room, where he found several men of his acquaintance who had retired there to talk business or scandal. He finally succeeded in slipping away from the house, and hastened at once to the club, where he hoped to meet Baron de Féroë, and where, in fact, he found him seated at a small card-table, playing écarté with the still beaming d'Aversac, who in simple justice we must confess, attempted to conceal his satisfaction in order not to humiliate Malivert. Despite the declaration of the proverb, "Lucky in love, unlucky at play," d'Aversac was winning, which, if he had possessed ever so little superstition, should have inspired him with doubts as to the solid foundation of his hopes. When the game which was in progress was ended, the Baron, as he had lost, could rise, pretend fatigue, and courteously refuse the revenge which his adversary offered him. He took Guy de Malivert's arm, and together they left the club and strolled up and down the nearest boulevard.

"What will the fashionable frequenters of the Bois," said Guy, "think of the woman, the sleigh, the horse, and the coachman, all so noticeable and so utterly unknown?"

"They were visible only to you, the Countess, upon whom the spirit wished to make an impression, and myself, who am enabled to see what is beyond the vision of other men. You can be sure that if Madame d'Ymbercourt mentions the beautiful Russian princess and her superb turnout, no one will understand what she means."

"Do you think," asked Malivert, "that I shall see Spirite again soon?"

"You can expect to do so very shortly," responded Monsieur de Féroë. "My advices from the other world inform me that you will not be kept waiting long."

"Will it be to-night or to-morrow, at my house or in some unexpected place, as happened to-day?" demanded Malivert, with the impatience of a lover and the curiosity of a neophyte.

"I can not tell you the precise time and place," replied the Swedish Baron. "For spirits there is no such thing as time, since they are elements of eternity. It would mean the same thing to Spirite if she were to see you this evening or a thousand years hence; but the spirits who deign to enter into communication with poor mortals, take into consideration the brief span of our life and the imperfection and frailty of our organism; they know that between one appearance and another, measured by the dial of eternity, the perishable form of man might a hundred times over have fallen into dust, and it is probable that Spirite will soon satisfy your longing to behold her again. She has descended to our sphere, and appears determined not to mount again to her own until her design is accomplished."

"But what is her design?" said Malivert. "You, to whom the supernatural world is as an open book, must know the motive which has led this pure spirit to seek a being who is still subject to the conditions of life."

"Upon that point, my dear Guy," was the Baron's response, "my lips are sealed; I must not repeat the secrets of a spirit. I have been warned to place you on your guard against forming any ties that might cause you eternal regret. My mission goes no further."

As they talked, Malivert and the Baron, followed by their carriages which proceeded slowly along near the curb, reached the Madeleine, whose Greek columns, silvered by the pale rays of the wintry moon, looked, from the end of the broad Rue Royale, not unlike the Parthenon, a resemblance which completely disappears in the full light of day. Here the two friends separated, and each entered his respective coupé.

When he reached home, Malivert threw himself down in a chair, and, with his elbows resting upon the table, abandoned himself to thought. Spirite's appearance in the mirror had inspired him with the spiritual longing and the soaring aspirations the sight of an angel might give birth to, but her presence on the borders of the lake, in a form more really feminine, had kindled in his heart all the flame of human love. He felt permeated by an overpowering ardent passion which even eternal possession would never quench. As he dreamed on, with his arm thrust out upon the mass of papers with which the table was covered, all at once he saw appear upon the dark background of the Turkish cloth a long, narrow hand, of a more exquisite shape than art has ever equaled, and which nature would try in vain to attain; a diaphanous hand with tapering fingers, nails polished like onyx, and with the azure veins showing through like those iris-like reflections that sleep in the milky heart of an opal. Exquisite in its coloring and ideally delicate in its shape, it could be the hand of no other than Spirite. The slender, refined, high-bred wrist faded away in a vapor of filmy laces. As if to show that the hand was there only as a sign the arm and body were absent. As Guy regarded it with eyes which could no more be astonished by the extraordinary, the fingers of the hand reached out to one of the sheets of letter-paper with which the table was littered, and imitated the action of writing. They seemed to be tracing words, and when they had traversed the page with that rapidity which actors show in inditing a letter upon the stage, Guy seized the sheet, expecting to find written sentences, known or unknown signs. The paper, however, was completely blank. Astonished and disappointed, Guy held it close to the rays of the lamp, and scrutinized it under all aspects, but without discovering the least mark upon it. And yet the hand was continuing upon another sheet the same imaginary labor, and with no more apparent result.

"What does this mean?" wondered Malivert. "Is Spirite writing with sympathetic ink which must be held to the fire to bring out the characters traced? But the mysterious fingers are holding no pen nor the shadow of a pen. What does she wish to convey? Must I serve as the spirit's secretary, be my own medium, so to speak? They say that spirits who can produce illusions and conjure up in the brains of mortals terrifying or entrancing pictures, are incapable of any influence over things purely material, and can not move even a straw a hair's breadth."

He remembered the strange impulse which had made him write the letter to Madame d'Ymbercourt, and he thought perhaps Spirite might succeed, by some mental telegraph, in dictating to him what she wished to say. He had only to relax the muscles of his hand, and silence as much as possible his own ideas, so that they should not mingle with those of the spirit. With an effort to isolate himself from his surroundings, and to quell the excited tumult of his brain, he raised the wick of the lamp, filled a pen with ink, placed his hand upon the paper, and, in a state between hope and fear, waited.

At the end of a few moments, he experienced a peculiar sensation; it seemed to him that his own personality was leaving him; that his recollections of the past were fading like the memories of a dream, and that his reasoning powers were fleeing from him, like birds gradually mounting higher and higher until they are lost to sight in the heavens. Although his body remained in the same attitude at the table, Guy himself was absent. Another soul, or at least another mind, was substituted for his own, and was in command of the members of his body, which, to act, awaited the orders of their unknown master. The fingers shivered with nervous tremblings, and commenced apparently mechanically to execute movements with the pen, rapidly tracing letters in Guy's handwriting, slightly modified with a certain foreign characteristic. The following is what Spirite dictated to her medium. This confession from the other world was found among Malivert's papers, and we have received permission to copy it:

DICTATED BY SPIRITE

It is important, first of all, for you to know and comprehend the being who has glided into your life, and who is so inexplicable to you. However great your penetration might be, it would be impossible for you to discover her true nature; so, like the hero of a poorly constructed tragedy, who announces his name, rank, and characteristics, I am forced to explain myself; but I have this excuse, that there is no one who could undertake the task for me. Your intrepid heart, which did not hesitate at my call to plunge into the mysterious terrors of the unknown, has no need to be reassured. Besides, if danger did exist, that would not prevent you continuing in the path upon which you have entered. This invisible world, of which the real is the veil, is not without snares and pitfalls, but you will not fall therein. It is infested with spirits of falsehood and wickedness; there are angels of darkness as well as angels of light; rebellious powers and submissive powers; legions of benevolence and legions of iniquity. The foot of the mystical ladder, the summit of which is plunged in eternal light, is encompassed in darkness. With my aid, I hope that you will mount the luminous steps. I am neither angel nor demon, nor one of those herald spirits who bear through boundless space the divine will, as the nervous current communicates to the members of the body the human will. I am simply a soul awaiting its judgment, but one that, by divine goodness, has been allowed to foresee a favorable sentence. I therefore once inhabited your world, and I might quote the words of the melancholy epitaph of the shepherd in Poussin's picture: *Et in Arcadiâ ego.* Do not think because I quote Latin that I was in life a woman of high intellectual acquirements. In the place where I now am we possess all knowledge, and the various languages which the human race has spoken before and since the destruction of Babel are equally familiar to us. Words are only the shadow of the idea, and we have the idea itself in its essential state. If there were such a thing as age in a place where time is unknown, I should be very young in my new country; but a few days have passed since, loosened from my bondage by death, I quitted the atmosphere which you breathe; but a sentiment, which not even the transition from one world to the other has been able to efface, has forced me to return. My terrestrial life—or, better, my last appearance upon your planet—was very short; but is was long enough for me to suffer all the sorrow a sensitive heart can feel. When the Baron de Féroë was seeking the nature of the spirit whose vague manifestations disturbed you, and asked you if any woman, any young girl, had ever died of love for you, he was nearer the truth than he believed, and although naturally you could remember nothing of the sort, since you were in ignorance of the fact, you were greatly disturbed by the question, and your emotion was but poorly concealed by a denial half mocking, half disdainful.

Without your perceiving it, my life was passed near yours. Your eyes were elsewhere, and you never noticed me.

The first time that I saw you was in

the parlor of the Convent des Oiseaux, where you were in the habit of going to visit your sister, who was there at school with me, although in a much higher class, for I was not more than thirteen or fourteen years of age, and I was so frail, small, and pale that I appeared much younger. You paid no attention to the little girl who, while munching the chocolate pralines from Marquis' which her mother had brought her, favored you now and then with a shy, furtive glance. At that time you must have been twenty or twenty-two, and in my childish artlessness I thought you very handsome. The kind and affectionate manner in which you spoke to your sister quite won my heart, and I longed to have a brother like you. My girlish desires went no further. When Mademoiselle de Malivert's studies were finished, they took her away from the convent, and you came there no more; but your image was never effaced from my memory. It was preserved upon the white parchment of my mind, like those faint lineaments traced in pencil by a skillful hand, and which are found long afterward, faded, but still to be distinguished, the only vestiges, perhaps, of one who has disappeared. The idea that such a distinguished personage could have noticed me, who was still in the infant class, and whom the more advanced scholars treated with a sort of disdain, would have been too presumptuous, and it never once crossed my brain, at least at that time; but I thought of you very often, and in those chaste romances which the most innocent imaginations weave, it was you who always filled the rôle of Prince Charming; you who delivered me from fancied perils; you who conducted me through underground passages; you who put to flight the corsairs and the brigands, and brought me back safe to the king, my father; for, of course, to be worthy of such a hero, I had to be at least a princess, and I modestly assumed the rank. Sometimes, the romance was changed into a pastoral; you were a shepherd, I a shepherdess, and our flocks browsed together in a meadow covered with the tenderest green herbage. You had not the faintest conception of it, but you occupied a large place in my life—had become in fact, my sovereign lord. I, in imagination, reported to you all my little successes in my studies, and I worked with all my strength to deserve your approbation. I said to myself, "He does not know that I have won a prize; but if he did know it, he would be pleased." And, although naturally idle, I applied myself to my work with renewed energy. Is it not strange that a child should give its heart in secret and become a vassal of the lord of its choice, without the latter even suspecting the liege homage tendered him? Is it not stranger still that this early impresssion was never effaced? for it lasted a whole life—a very short one, alas! and continues beyond the grave. When I saw you, there awoke in me something indefinable, mysterious, the meaning of which I did not understand until the closing of my eyes opened them forever. My present condition as an impalpable being, a pure spirit, permits me to relate to you things which a girl of earth might perhaps hide; but the immaculate whiteness of a soul knows nothing of blushes; celestial modesty confesses love

Two years passed away. From a child I became a young girl, and my dreams, while preserving all their innocence, began to be a little less puerile; there were mingled in them less rose color and azure, and they did not always end in the glory of an apotheosis. I used often to go to the foot of the garden, and, seated upon a bench, far from my companions, who were occupied with their games and their whispered conversations, I would murmur as a sort of litany the syllables of your name; but sometimes I was hardy enough to think that this name might some day be my own, after mischances and adventures as intricate as those of an old-fashioned comedy of the sixteenth century, and the incidents of which I arranged and altered at pleasure.

In point of birth I was your equal, and my parents enjoyed a rank and fortune which rendered by no means chimerical or absurd this distant project of a union that I had formed very timidly in the inmost recesses of my heart. Nothing was more probable than that we should meet some day in that society to which we both had access. But would I please you? Would you think me pretty? Those were questions to which the narrow glass in my little room did not return a negative answer, as you may judge from my reflection in your Venetian mirror and my appearance in the Bois de Boulogne. But suppose you should pay no more attention to the young girl than you had to the child of the Convent des Oiseaux! That thought overwhelmed me with discouragement; but youth never despairs long, and I soon returned to brighter visions. It seemed to me impossible that, when you beheld me, you should not recognize your property, your conquest, the soul sealed with your soul, the heart that had been vowed to your adoration from infancy; in a word, the woman created expressly for you. I did not put it to myself so clearly as this; I did not possess that knowledge of the movements of the heart that I have acquired, now that I can see both sides of life; but it was an unerring instinct, a blind faith, an irresistible conviction. In spite of my virginal innocence and purity, there was kindled in my heart a passion which was destined to devour me, and which is now revealed for the first time. At the convent I made no friends, and I lived alone with the thought of you for my sole companion. Jealous of my secret, I dreaded disclosures and confidences, and I would form no attachment which might interfere with my one thought and hope. They called me "La Sérieuse," and the sisters pointed me out as an example.

I waited the time fixed for my departure from the convent with less impatience than one might suppose; my sojourn there was a respite between thought and action.

As long as I was confined between those high walls, I had the right to nurse my dream without any reason for self-reproach; but once freed from the cage, I must spread my wings, direct myself to my goal, mount toward my star; and custom, propriety, modesty—the multitude of veils which civilization draws about a young girl—forbids her any initiative in affairs of the heart. No manner of revealing her feelings to the object of her affections is permitted to her. A proper feeling of pride prevents her from offering what should be beyond all price. Her eyes must remain lowered, her lips mute, her bosom motionless; no blush, no pallor, must betray her when she finds herself in the presence of the object secretly loved, and who often retires believing that she feels for him only disdain or indifference. How many hearts made for one another, for the lack of a word, a look, a smile, have taken divergent paths which separated them more and more, and rendered their reunion forever impossible! How many lives that have been deplorably unsuccessful, have owed their unhappiness to some mischance unperceived by all, and sometimes unrevealed to the victims themselves! I had often indulged in such reflections, and they were predominant in my mind at the moment when I was about to leave the convent to enter the world. However, my resolution did not falter.

The day of my departure arrived. My mother came for me, and I bade farewell to my companions without any remarkable display of feeling. I left behind me no friend within those walls where many years of my life had been passed, and I carried away no regret. The thought of you, and the thought of you alone, formed all the treasures of my heart.

Chapter VIII

REALIZATION

It was with a keen feeling of pleasure that I entered the room, or rather the little suite of apartments, that my mother had prepared for my return from the convent. There were a bedchamber, a large dressing-room, and a parlor, the windows of which looked out upon a garden, or rather a succession of gardens; a low wall, thickly overgrown with ivy, served as a dividing-line between the different properties; but the stone was nowhere visible, and you could see only masses and groups of ancient trees, gigantic chestnuts, which produced the effect of a boundless park. In the distance, between the branches appeared the angle of a roof, the odd, twisted outline of a chimney—a mark which Paris places low down upon the horizon of all her views. It is a rare gratification, and one reserved for the wealthy, to have spread out before you, in the midst of the great city, a broad, free space of air, sky, sunshine, and verdure. Is it not disagreeable to feel crowded in upon you other lives, passions, vices, misfortunes, and are not your delicacy and modesty a little smirched by the contact? So I felt genuine delight as I looked out from my windows upon this oasis of freshness, silence, and solitude. It was in the month of August that I ended my last scholastic year at the convent, and the foliage was still thick, although it had acquired the deeper coloring which the passage of summer lends to vegetation. In the middle of the flower-bed which was laid out beneath my windows, a mass of geraniums in full bloom dazzled the eye with their scarlet flame, the vivid red forming a striking contrast to the emerald turf of the lawn of English grass. In the walks of fine sand, which had been raked until they looked like strips of watered ribbon, the birds hopped about in perfect confidence, and had the air of being at home. I resolved to join them in their walks without frightening them away.

My chamber was hung with white cashmere, marked off here and there with cords of blue silk. The curtains were also blue, and the furniture was covered with the same shade. In my little parlor, which was decorated in a similar manner, a magnificent Erard piano offered its keys to my eager hands, which at once drew forth notes both soft and deep. A rosewood bookcase, placed opposite the piano, contained those pure books, those chaste poets, which a maiden may read; and upon the lower shelves rested the scores of the great composers: Bach elbowed Haydn, Mozart was beside Beethoven, a conjunction similar to that of Raphael and Michael Angelo, and Meyerbeer leaned against Weber. My mother had collected together my favorite composers. A beautiful jardiniére, full of the sweetest scented flowers, brightened the center of the room, and looked like an enormous bouquet. They all treated me like a spoiled child. I was an only daughter, and the entire affection of my parents was naturally concentrated upon me.

I was to make my début in society at the beginning of the season—that is to say, in two or three months, when people returned from their country visits, their journeys, their stay at the sea-shore, the hunts, the races, and all that has been invented to consume the time when it is proper for people who boast social supremacy to be absent from Paris, where a matter of business had detained my father and mother this particular year. I greatly preferred to remain in the city, rather than to go to the somewhat dismal old château in the heart of Brittany, where I had always spent my vacations; and, besides, I thought that I might have chances to meet you, to hear of you, and to encounter people who knew you; but I learned, in an indirect fashion, that you had been in Spain for a long time, and might remain there for several months longer. Your friends, to whom you wrote but rarely, did not expect you back before winter; they laughingly said that you were a captive in the network of some fair señorita's mantilla. This did not cause me much uneasiness, for I was conceited enough to believe that my golden locks could vie successfully with all the jetty tresses of Andalusia. I learned also that you wrote articles for the magazines, using as a pseudonym a Latinized form of one of your Christian names, a fact which only your intimate friends were aware of, and that under your exterior of a man of the world lurked a distinguished writer. With a curiosity easy to understand, I sought through the periodicals for all the articles which bore your signature. To read an author is to place yourself in direct communication with his heart and mind. Is not a book a confidential epistle addressed to an ideal friend, a monologue delivered to one who is absent? What an author says must not always be taken too literally; one should take into account literary style, affectations that happen to be the fashion, a certain reticence which must perforce be practiced, the unconscious imitation of some favorite writer, and all that may tend to modify the outer expression of ideas. But under all disguises the real qualities of heart and mind are certain to be revealed to him who knows how to read; the true thought is often hidden between the lines, and the secret of the poet, which he does not always wish to divulge to the vulgar crowd, is finally discovered; one after another the veils fall, and the solutions of the enigmas are guessed. In order to form an idea of what you were, I studied with the closest attention your tales of journeyings, your bits of philosophy and criticism, your stories, and the stanzas of verse which were scattered here and there throughout your writings, and which gave an insight into the different phases of your mind. It is less difficult to become acquainted with a subjective author than with an objective one. The former expresses his own sentiments, declares his own ideas, and judges society and the world from an ideal point of view which is the outcome of his own imagination. The latter presents objects as nature has made them; he deals with descriptions of people and things as they are, and brings them vividly before the eyes of the reader; he draws, costumes, and colors his characters with the most scrupulous exactitude, puts in their mouths words which they might naturally have said, and holds his own opinion in reserve. This style was yours. From a cursory reading, one might have accused you of a certain apathetic disdain, which could see but little difference between a man and a lizard, between a sunset and the burning of a city; but upon a closer examination, from your brief words of enthusiasm quickly repressed, one could divine a deep sensitiveness and appreciation of goodness and beauty, held in restraint by a proud fear of any display of emotion.

This judgment, based upon your literary work, was in accord with the instinctive judgment of my heart; and now that nothing is hidden from me, I know how correct and just it was. All sentimental exaggeration, all complaining and hypocritical pretence of virtue was repulsive to you, and deception was in your eyes the worst of crimes. This feeling caused you to be exceedingly temperate in the expression of thoughts of tenderness and love. You preferred silence to a lie, or to any exaggeration where sacred things were in question, even should you pass in the eyes of simpletons as insensible, harsh, and even a little cruel. I recognized all this, and I did not doubt for an instant the goodness of your heart. I never felt the least uncertainty as to your nobleness of spirit; this was sufficiently demonstrated to me by your haughty disdain of vulgarity, pretence, envy, and all moral deformities. From reading your writings so constantly and carefully, I acquired a knowledge of you, whom I had seen but once, as thorough as if I had been intimate with you for years. I had penetrated into the most secret recesses of your mind; I knew your principles, your aims, your motives, your sympathies and your antipathies, what you admired and what you disliked; in fact, your whole intellectual personality, and from all this I formed an idea of your character. Sometimes, as I read, I would be struck by a passage which was a sort of revelation to me; and, rising, I would go to the piano and play, as a species of commentary upon the thought you had expressed, a melody full of analogous color and sentiment, and which seemed to me to be a continuation of your idea in notes of triumph or melancholy, as the case might be. I enjoyed hearing in another branch of art the echo of your thought. Perhaps the connection between the two existed only in my imagination, and would not have been perceived by any other than myself, but at times it was certainly real. I know the fact now that my home is near the eternal source of inspiration, and I see it descend in luminous sparks upon the heads of the favored children of genius.

While I passed my time in reading such of your writings as I could procure, for a young girl's life is so circumscribed that the most simple action is a matter of difficulty to her, the season advanced, and the tips of the trees were flushed with the orange tints of autumn; the leaves, one after another, fell from the branches, and all the efforts of the gardener to keep the walks and lawns unlittered with them were unavailing. Sometimes, when I walked in the garden under the chestnuts, the fall of a nut, striking upon my head or breaking into pieces at my feet, interrupted my reverie, and startled me in spite of myself. The delicate plants and the shrubs most sensitive to the cold were taken into the greenhouse. The birds flew about with that uneasy air which they have at the approach of winter, and in the evening they could be heard quarreling among the leafless boughs. At last, the opening of the social season was close at hand; the world of rank, wealth, and beauty was returning to Paris from all points of the compass. Dignified carriages, with coats of arms emblazoned upon the panels, were once more seen rolling toward the Arc de l'Etoile, to catch the last rays of sunshine. The Italiens was announced to reopen shortly, and the list of the singers, with the operas to be performed, was advertised in the papers. I rejoiced in the idea that this general return of the wanderers would bring you back from Spain, and that, weary of climbing the sierras, you would be glad to appear at balls, receptions, and dinners, where there was a hope that I might meet you.

One day when I was going to the Bois de Boulogne with my mother, I saw you pass on horseback quite close to our carriage, but so rapidly that I had scarcely time to recognize you. This was the first time that I had seen you since your visits to the Convent des Oiseaux; the blood seemed to flow back to my heart, and my nerves tingled as with an electric shock. Pretending that it was cold, I lowered my veil to hide the change in my face, and silently drew back into the corner of the carriage. My mother closed the window, saying: "It is certainly not very warm; the mist is beginning to rise; we will return, unless you wish to continue the drive." I made a sign of acquiescence; I had seen what I had been watching for, and knew that you were in Paris.

We had taken a box at the Italiens for one night each week. It was a great delight to me to think of hearing singers whom I had seen so highly praised in print, and whom I had not as yet had a chance to hear; and, moreover, my heart was gently stirred by another anticipation—what it was, there is no need to tell you.

Our night arrived. The opera was

Somnambula, and Patti was to sing. Mamma had ordered for me a simple, pretty gown, suitable for my age—soft, white silk, with an overdress of tulle, caught here and there with knots of pearls and blue velvet. My hair was dressed with pearls and a bow of the velvet. As I looked at myself in the glass, while the maid was putting the finishing touches to her work, I thought: "Does he like blue? In Alfred de Musset's Caprice, Madame de Léry claims that it is an ugly color." Still, I could not help thinking that the blue looked well against my golden hair; if you had seen me, I think that you would have fallen in love with me. Clotilde, the maid, as she arranged my skirts and adjusted the bows upon my corsage, remarked that "Mademoiselle looked very pretty this evening."

The carriage deposited my mother and myself before the vestibule of the theater—my father was to join us later—and we commenced to mount the grand staircase, the steps of which were covered with a red carpet. The atmosphere was warm and redolent of perfume; and women in full toilettes, still covered with cloaks, burnos, and scarfs, which they would hand later to the footmen, ascended the stairs, resting the tips of their fingers upon the arms of grave men in white cravats, whose lapels, covered with decorations, showed that, after the opera, they were due at some official or diplomatic reception. Slender, trim young men, with their hair parted in the middle, and dressed in the most irreproachable fashion, followed the various groups, bound to them by the smiles of the fair ladies.

There is, of course, nothing very novel in all this for you, and you could describe the picture better than I; but the spectacle was a new one for a little convent-bred girl, who was making her entrance into society. Life is always the same; it is a stage representation, where nothing changes except the spectators; but one who has not seen the piece before, is as interested in it as if it had been written expressly for him, and this was its first representation. I felt that I was looking well, and I was in the best of spirits. Several approving looks were fixed upon me, and more than one woman, after a rapid glance which took me in from head to foot, turned away without having found anything to criticize, either in my person or my dress.

A secret presentiment warned me that I was to see you that evening, and this hope gave brilliancy to my eyes, and lent to my cheeks a color more vivid than usual. We were no sooner installed in our box, than opera-glasses from all sides were turned upon me. Mine was a new face, and all new faces are at once noticed at the Italiens, which is like a great drawing-room, where everyone is acquainted. My mother's presence disclosed my identity, and I saw that they were talking about me in many boxes, and the impression I had created was certainly favorable, for pleasant smiles accompanied the whispered words. It disturbed me a little to be the cynosure of all eyes, and, as I was wearing a low bodice for the first time, I felt my shoulders shiver beneath the gauze which covered them with its semi-transparency. But when the curtain rose, all faces were turned toward the stage, and my embarrassment was at an end.

The appearance of the beautiful auditorium, with its gildings, its lights, and its white caryatides, and the profusion of diamonds and flowers, certainly filled me with astonishment and admiration; and Bellini's music, executed by artists of the first order, carried me away into an enchanted world; but still the real interest of the evening for me was elsewhere. While my ears were listening to the sweet melodies of the Sicilian maëstro, my eyes were furtively scrutinizing each box, running over the balcony, and searching the rows of orchestra-chairs, in order to discover you. You did not arrive until toward the end of the first act; and when the curtain fell, you made a half circuit of the theater, looking rather bored as you absently swept your glance over the boxes, without fixing your glass upon any. Your six months in Spain had bronzed your complexion, and there was a certain expression upon your face as if you regretted the country you had just left. My heart beat violently while you were making this rapid inspection, and for an instant I thought that your eyes had rested upon me; but I was mistaken. I saw you leave your place, and appear a few minutes after in a box opposite ours, which was occupied by a pretty woman, very elegantly dressed; her black hair glistened with the lustre of satin, and her gown of pale pink was scarcely to be distinguished from the flesh tints of her neck and arms. Diamonds sparkled in her hair, in her ears, and wherever it was possible for them to be placed. Upon the velvet-covered edge of her box, beside her opera-glass, was placed a large bouquet of camellias and Parma violets. At the back of the box, in the shadow, could be distinguished an old, stout, bald personage, the lapel of whose coat was half-covered by the order of a foreign court. The lady welcomed you with evident pleasure, and you answered her calmly and indifferently, without appearing in the least flattered by her more than friendly demonstrations. My disappointment at not being noticed by you was compensated for by the joy of feeling that you did not love this woman with the bold eyes, the enticing smile, and the striking toilette.

After a few minutes, as the musicians were beginning to tune their instruments for the second act, you took leave of the bediamonded lady and the decorated old gentleman, and returned to your place. You did not turn your head again during the performance, and I secretly felt a little impatient with you. I was surprised that you did not divine that a young girl in white and blue was longing to be noticed by the lord whom she had chosen in her heart. For such a long time I had looked forward to being in the same place with you! My desire was realized, and you did not even suspect my presence! It seemed to me that you might have felt a sympathetic current, turned, sought slowly in the auditorium for the reason of the unknown emotion, allowed your gaze to rest upon our box, clasped your hand upon your heart, and fallen into an ecstacy of admiration. A hero of romance would not have failed to do so; but then, you were not a hero of romance.

My father, who had been detained at a large dinner, did not arrive until the middle of the second act. He at once perceived you in the orchestra, and remarked: "There is Guy de Malivert; I did not know that he had returned from Spain. His journey will give us, probably, a plea for bull-fights in the *Revue;* Guy is something of a barbarian, you know." I liked to hear your name spoken by my father's lips, for it proved that you were not unknown to my family; an introduction was possible, even easy, and this thought consoled me a little for my lack of success that evening. The performance was finished without any other incident than the showers of bouquets, the recalls, and the ovation given to Patti. While we were waiting in the vestibule for the footman to announce our carriage, I saw you pass with a friend, and draw a cigar from a handsome Manilla case. The desire to smoke rendered you insensible to the exhibition of beauty, and, it must be confessed, of ugliness also, displayed upon the lower steps of the staircase. You made your way, somewhat cavalierly, amidst the mass of millinery, and you soon gained the door with your companion, who had followed in the pathway opened by you.

I returned home both happy and disappointed, and after trying absently some of the airs of La Somnambula upon the piano, as if to prolong the delights of the evening, I went to bed to dream of you.

Chapter IX

THE FLOW CEASES

When we have cherished for a long time the memory of a person in our hearts, and are suddenly confronted with his living, breathing image, we often find that our imagination has worked as a painter works upon a portrait in the absence of the original, softening the defects, blending the tints, improving the lines, and unconsciously shaping the face into an ideal of his own fancy. I had not seen you for more than three years, but upon my heart your features were indelibly engraven. I found that my memory had not played me false, but you yourself had changed somewhat. Your face had become firmer, stronger, and the warmth of the sun had given your complexion a richer, deeper color. You were no longer a boy, and you had that air of calm authority and conscious strength which, perhaps, is more fascinating to women than mere beauty of feature. Still, I guarded none the less closely in my heart the first slight but ineffaceable sketch of the being who was destined to exercise so great an influence over me, as one preserves an old-fashioned miniature of a boy beside the portrait of the man as he is. My dreams had not deceived me, and when I saw you again, I was not obliged to despoil you of a mantle of fancied perfections.

I thought of all this as I lay in bed watching the flickering reflection of the night-lamp upon the blue roses of the carpet, and awaiting the advent of sleep, which did not descend upon my eyelids until toward morning, and was then an uneasy slumber, full of disconnected dreams and indistinct strains of melody.

A few weeks afterward, we received an invitation to a grand ball to be given by the Duchess de C——. Her first ball is an important matter to a young girl, and it became all the more interesting to me because it was probable that you would be present, as the Duchess was one of your most intimate friends. Balls are our battles, which lead us to victory or defeat; there a young girl, who has just emerged from the shades of school life, sparkles with her purest lustre. For a short space of time she is allowed, under pretext of dancing, a sort of relative liberty, and a ball is to her like the corridors of an opera-house where the masqueraders remove their masks. An invitation to dance a quadrille or a mazurka permits a young man to approach her and address a few words to her between the figures of the dance; but very often the little card upon which she notes down her engagements does not contain the name she most desired to see there.

My toilette occupied much of my attention; a ball-dress is a poem, and that of a young girl is full of puzzling difficulties. It must be simple, but rich at the same time, qualities which it is no easy matter to combine; the white muslin gown, which the novelists write of, would not be proper at all. After much hesitation, I decided upon a dress of gauze, striped with silver, caught with sprays of myositis, whose color harmonized beautifully with the necklace of turquoises which my father had chosen for me at Janisset's; turquoise pins, wrought in imitation of the flower with which my dress was adorned, were caught here and there in my hair. Thus fortified, I felt capable of appearing without too much disadvantage among the celebrated beauties and their splendid toilettes. Truly, for a simple daughter of the earth, I looked exceedingly well.

The Duchess de C—— lived in one of those immense mansions in the Faubourg Saint-Germain which were built to suit the grandeur of by-gone days, and which are so unfitted to modern every-day life; only in the crowded brilliancy of some grand entertainment do they recover anything of their former gayety and animation. Looking at it from the outside, one would never suspect the extent of this almost princely residence; a high wall between two houses, with a monumental porte-cochère, surmounted by a tablet of green marble bearing, in letters of gold, the inscription, *Hôtel de C——*, was all that could be seen from the street. A long avenue of old lindens, trimmed so as to form an arch, in the old French fashion, and now denuded of their leaves, led to an immense courtyard, at the end of which was the house, built in the Louis Quatorze style, and recalling, with its lofty windows, its twisted pilasters, and the numerous peaks of its roof, the architecture of Versailles. A red and white awning, supported by posts of carved wood, was spread before the richly carpeted steps. I had time to examine all these details in the light of the strings of Japanese lanterns; for, although the invitations had been strictly limited, the crowd was so great that we had to wait in line, as at a Court reception. Our carriage finally reached the door, and we alighted and handed our wraps to our footman. Just outside the swinging glass doors stood a gigantic porter, of the most imposing mien. Within the vestibule, we passed between two rows of footmen in powdered hair and gorgeous liveries, all tall, motionless, and grave; they might have passed for the caryatides of lackeydom. They seemed to appreciate the honor of being servants in such a house. The staircase, almost as spacious in itself as a modern palazzino, was lined on both sides with enormous camellias. On each landing, a large mirror permitted the women to repair those little disarrangements which a wrap, no matter how light it may be, causes in a ball costume. The scene was brilliantly illuminated by a chandelier which was suspended by gilded chains from the dome of the cupola, where, upon a background of azure, interspersed with clouds, the brush of a Lebrun or a Mignard had depicted a mythological allegory in the taste of the time.

In the spaces between the windows were landscapes of an oblong shape, severe in style and dusky in coloring, that were probably the work of Poussin, or at least of Gaspard Dughet. Such, at all events, was the opinion of a celebrated painter who ascended the stairs by our side, and who, with the aid of his glasses, was examining everything with the greatest interest. At each turning, upon pedestals which formed the angles of the balustrade, a marvel of intricate iron-work, marble statues by Lepautre and Théodon upheld candelabra, which served to increase the light shed from the chandelier, and lent additional brilliancy to the scene.

At the door of the antechamber, the walls of which were paneled in old oak and hung with Gobelin tapestry after designs by Oudry, stood an usher, dressed in black, with a silver chain about his neck, who, in a more or less ringing voice, according to the importance of the personage, announced the names of the guests.

The Duke—tall, thin, and supple, reminding one of a greyhound of pure blood—looked the high-bred gentleman he was, and, despite his age, he still preserved traces of his youthful beauty. He would never have been taken in the street for anything but what he was. Standing a few steps from the entrance, he received his guests with a gracious word, a shake of the hand, a bow, or a smile, and with such unerring knowledge of what was due to each, and a tact so perfect that all were satisfied, and each one believed himself specially favored. He saluted my mother with a commingling of respect and friendship, and, as it was the first time that he had seen me, he addressed to me a little speech, half paternal, half gallant—a sort of madrigal, full of old-fashioned, gentle courtesy.

Near the fire-place stood the Duchess, rouged with a careless contempt of all illusion; wearing an evident wig, and displaying upon her bony neck, which was fearlessly exposed above a low-cut bodice, diamonds that were world-renowned. She was exceedingly intelligent and witty, and beneath her darkened brows her eyes glowed still with extraordinary fire. She was dressed in a gown of brocaded velvet, trimmed with priceless point-lace, and with a spray of diamonds upon the corsage. Now and then, while conversing with the groups who had advanced to pay her their respects, she would fan herself abstractedly with a large fan, painted by Watteau. Her manners were gracious and dignified—those of a woman whose birth and breeding were unquestioned. She exchanged a few words with my mother, who presented me to her, and, as I bent my head, she brushed my forehead with her cold lips, and said: "Enjoy yourself, my dear, and do not miss a single dance."

This ceremony accomplished, we entered the next room, beyond which was the dancing-hall. Against the red damask walls were hung, in magnificent frames of the time in which the pictures were painted, family portraits, which had been placed there through no wish to display a long line of ancestors, but simply because they were masterpieces of art. There were pictures by Clouet, Porbus, Van Dyck, Philippe de Champagne, and Largillière, all worthy to adorn the walls of a national gallery. What pleased me the most, amidst all the luxury, was, that nothing seemed of recent date. The frescoes, the gilding, the draperies, and the coverings of the furniture, without being exactly faded, were subdued in tint, and did not offend the eyes with the blatant glitter of newness. You felt that the wealth was immemorial, and that things had always been so. The dancing-hall was of dimensions rarely seen even in palaces. Numerous branched candlesticks and stands of lights, placed in the interstices of the windows, gave the effect, with their millions of candles, of a brilliant conflagration, through which the frescoes of the walls, garlands of nymphs and cupids, appeared as if seen through a pinkish mist. Despite the multitude of blazing lights, the room was so vast that there was plenty of air, and no one found any difficulty in breathing.

The orchestra was stationed in a sort of gallery at the end of the hall, amidst a mass of rare plants. Upon the rows of velvet sofas placed in a semi-circle about the room, sat long lines of women, remarkable for their jewels, if not for their beauty, although some of them were very pretty. The whole effect was magnificent. We had entered during an interval of the dancing, and when I found myself seated beside my mother upon one of the sofas, I regarded, with a mingling of curiosity and astonishment, this spectacle, which was something so new to me. The men, after escorting their partners back to their places, promenaded up and down the middle of the room, glancing to right and left, and passing the women in a sort of review, before making their choice. These gentlemen were chiefly the younger guests, as men who have reached a certain age no longer care for dancing. There were young attachés of embassies, secretaries of legation, members of the Council of State *in prospectu;* future diplomats, still beardless; sportsmen in embryo, dreaming of a well-stocked stable; dandies, whose budding moustaches were only a faint down; eldest sons, displaying the precocious assurance of a great name and a great fortune. Amidst all this display of youth were a few grave personages, covered with decorations, whose polished craniums shone like ivory beneath the gas-jets, or were hidden beneath wigs too black or too blonde. Stopping now and then, they would exchange a few polite words with the dowagers who were contemporaries of their youth, and then, turning away, would scrutinize, like disinterested connoisseurs, the feminine seraglio displayed before their spectacled eyes. The first notes of the orchestra made them hurry away, as fast as their gouty feet could carry them, to more quiet rooms, where there were tables, lighted by chandeliers, covered with broad, green shades, at which they could play bouillotte or écarté.

As you may well imagine, I did not lack invitations to dance. A young Hungarian, in the costume of a Magnate, all befrogged and embroidered, and sparkling with buttons of precious stones, bowed gracefully before me, and begged the honor of my hand for a mazurka. His features were regular, his complexion romantically pale, his eyes large, dark, and gleaming, and his moustache was waxed fiercely into two sharp points. An Englishman of twenty-two or three years, who resembled Lord Byron except that he was not lame, an attaché of one of the northern courts, and several others inscribed their names upon my card. Although the old dancing-master of the convent had declared me one of his best pupils, and praised my grace, lightness, and appreciation of time, I was not, I must confess, entirely at my ease. I felt, as the newspapers say, the emotion inseparable from a début. It seemed to me, as is frequently the case with timid people, that all eyes were fixed upon me. Fortunately, my Hungarian was an excellent dancer; he supported my first steps, and soon, carried away by the music and fascinated by the motion, I became more confident, and allowed myself to be borne into the whirl of floating skirts with a sort of nervous delight; but still I did not forget you, my constant thought, and the motive for which I had come to the ball. As I passed near the doors, with a rapid glance I tried to discover you in the neighboring rooms; and at last I perceived you, standing in the embrasure of one of the windows, talking to a person with a bronzed face, a long nose, and a heavy black beard, wearing a red fez and a Nizam uniform, with the order of Medjidieh upon his breast—some bey or pacha. When the circle of the dance brought me round again, you were still there talking animatedly to the placidly serene Turk, and you did not deign to cast a glance at the pretty faces which, flushed with the exercise, whirled by you. I did not lose all hope, however, and for the moment I was satisfied with the knowledge that you were there; besides, the evening was still young, and some chance might yet throw us together.

My partner led me back to my place, and again the men began to circle about the open space in front of the sofas. You took a few steps with your Turk amidst the moving crowd, examining the women and the toilettes, but with the same look you would have bestowed upon pictures and statues. Now and then you addressed a remark to your friend, the pacha, who smiled gravely in his beard. I saw all this through the sticks of my fan, which, I acknowledge, I lowered when you approached the place where we were seated. My heart throbbed violently, and I felt my face become suffused with blushes. It was impossible, this time, that I should escape your notice, for you were walking as close to the rows of seats as the gorgeous fringe of gauze, lace, and silk would permit you; but, as misfortune would have it, just at that moment two or three friends of my mother's stopped just in front of us to pay us their respects. Their black coats formed a screen which completely hid me. You were forced to walk around the group, and you did not perceive me, although I had leaned a little forward in the hope that you would do so. But you could not divine that those dress-coats, bending respectfully forward, concealed a pretty young girl, whose only thought was of you. I saw you leave the dancing-hall at the other end of the room, the Turk's red cap serving as a beacon to prevent me from losing you amidst the multitude of black coats, which are alike the festal and mourning garments of the men of to-day. All my pleasure was gone, and I felt utterly discouraged. Destiny, with tantalizing irony, seemed to take pleasure in keeping us apart. I fulfilled the engagements I had made, and then, under the pretext of fatigue, refused all other invitations. The ball had lost its charm; the dresses seemed to me shabby, and the lights dim. My father, who had been playing cards and had lost a hundred louis to an old general, came to escort us through the apartments and show us the conservatory, which was said to be very wonderful. And, indeed, nothing could have been more magnificent. One might easily have imagined oneself in a virgin forest, there were so many banana-trees, orange-trees, palms, and tropical plants flourishing vigorously in the warm atmosphere, saturated with exotic perfumes. At the end of the conservatory was a white marble naïade emptying her urn into a gigantic South Sea shell, embedded in moss and water-plants. There I saw you once more; you were with your sister, but it was impossible for us to meet, for we were both walking in the same direction along the green-edged path of yellow sand which wound amidst the masses of plants, flowers, and verdure.

We wandered for awhile through the various rooms, where it was much easier to move about, now that the exhausted dancers had sought the supper-table, which was spread with all imaginable dainties in a gallery, paneled with ebony and gold, and adorned with pictures by Desportes, representing flowers, fruits, and game of superb coloring, which the progress of time had only enriched. Although at the time I saw all these details with an absent eye, they were indelibly impressed upon my memory, and I remember them still in that world where mortal life seems only the shadow of a dream. They are connected with those undying sentiments which have forced me to come back to the earth. My return home was as sad as my start for the ball had been joyful, and I was forced to attribute my dejection to a slight headache. As I exchanged the ball costume, which had been of no avail, for my night robes, I thought, with a sigh: "Why did not he invite me to dance, as well as that Hungarian, that Englishman, and those other gentlemen for whom I cared nothing? It would have been very simple, and the most natural thing in the world. But everybody looked at me, except the one being whose attention I desired. Ah! my love has no luck." I retired to bed and wet my pillow with my tears.

Here ended Spirite's first communication. For a long time the lamp had been extinct, for lack of oil, but Malivert, like somnambulists who need no external light, had continued to write; in utter unconsciousness on his part, page was added to page. Suddenly, the influence which guided his hand ceased, and his own ideas, the flow of which had been suspended to make way for those of Spirite, returned to him. The first streaks of daylight were filtering through the closed shutters. He threw them open, and in the bleak light of the winter morning he saw strewn upon his table a quantity of sheets covered with sentences written in a rapid, feverish hand—his work of the night. Although he had written them himself, he was in ignorance of the meaning they conveyed. There is no need to relate with what eager curiosity, with what deep emotion, he read the pure, artless confession of the adorable young soul he had so innocently tortured. This tardy avowal of love, coming from the other world and sighed forth by a spirit, filled him with despairing regret and impotent anger against himself. How could he have been so stupid, so blind, as to pass close to happiness, without perceiving it? He finally became calm, however, and happening to raise his eyes to the Venetian mirror, he saw the reflection of Spirite smiling down upon him.

Chapter X

ANOTHER DICTATION

It is a strange sensation to be told of a happiness that might have been yours, but which you never perceived, and missed by your own fault. Under no circumstances is the regret for what is irreparable more bitter; you would like to lead your life over again; you see how you ought to have behaved, and in the new light you have gained your perspicacity becomes astonishing; but life can not be turned back like an hour-glass. The sands once fallen will never rise again.

It was to no purpose that Guy de Malivert reproached himself for not having had the wit to discover the charming girl, who was not imprisoned in a harem of Constantinople, nor hidden behind the iron gratings of a convent of Italy or Spain, nor watched like Rosina by a jealous guardian, but who moved in the same ranks of society that he did, whom he could see every day, and from whom he was separated by no obstacle whatever. She loved him; he could have asked for her hand, obtained it, and enjoyed the supreme and rare felicity of being united, in this world, to the soul made for his soul. From the manner in which he worshiped the spirit, he understood with what passionate love the woman would have inspired him. But it was not long before his thoughts took another course, and he ceased to blame himself and to rail against fate. After all, what had he lost, since Spirite had preserved her love beyond the tomb, and had drawn herself from the depths of the infinite to descend to the sphere inhabited by him? Was not the love he felt more noble, more poetical, more ethereal, more like eternal love, thus freed, as it was, from all earthly contact, and having for its object a beauty idealized by death? Did not the most perfect human union have its moments of weariness, satiety, and irksomeness? The eyes most blinded by passion, at the end of a few years, are sure to witness the decay of the charms once adored; the soul is less visible through the faded, wrinkled flesh, and love in amaze seeks in vain its lost idol.

These reflections and the ordinary course of every-day life with its exactions, from which not even the most enthusiastic dreams can emancipate themselves, occupied the time until the evening, which Malivert had impatiently awaited, arrived. When he was alone in his study, and, as on the previous evening, seated at the table in the position of writing, the little, white, slender, blue-veined hand appeared again and motioned him to take the pen. He obeyed, and his fingers began to move of themselves, without any dictation from his brain. For his thoughts, were substituted those of Spirite.

DICTATED BY SPIRITE

I will not weary you in a posthumous fashion by relating to you all the disappointments I had to undergo. One day, however, a great joy came to me, and I thought that malicious fate, which had seemed to delight in hiding me from your eyes, was about to cease its willfulness. We were invited to dine the following Saturday with Monsieur de L——. This in itself would have been a matter of no importance to me, had I not learned during the week, through Baron de Féroê, who came occasionally to the house, that you were to be one of the guests of this half-worldly, half-literary gathering; for it was Monsieur de L——'s special delight to entertain artists and authors. He was a man of taste, a connoisseur in books and pictures, who had a faultlessly chosen library and picture-gallery. You were in the habit of going sometimes to his receptions, like many authors already celebrated, or on the way to become so. Monsieur de L—— prided himself on his ability to discover genius; and he was not one of those who believe only in people whose reputations are already made. In my childish excitement and delight, I thought: "At last I hold this fugitive will o' the wisp, and this time he can not escape; when we are seated at the table, perhaps side by side, in the full blaze of fifty candles, no matter how absent-minded he may be, he can not fail to notice me—unless there should be between us a basket of flowers, or a tall centre-piece, which would hide me."

The days which still separated me from the happy Saturday appeared of endless duration—as long as the lesson-hours at the convent. They passed at last, however, and all three of us—my father, my mother, and myself—arrived at Monsieur de L——'s about a quarter of an hour before the time fixed for the dinner. The guests were scattered about the drawing-room, chatting in groups, wandering about, looking at the pictures, opening the books lying upon the table, or retailing theatrical gossip to two or three women seated on a divan beside the mistress of the house. Among them were a few illustrious writers, whom my father pointed out to me, and whose appearance did not seem to me to be at all in consonance with the character of their work. You were the only one of the guests who had not arrived, and Monsieur de L—— was beginning to complain of your want of punctuality, when a tall lackey entered, bearing upon a silver waiter a telegram from you, sent from Chantilly, and containing these sentences, worded in electric style: "Missed the train. Do not wait for me. In despair."

The disappointment was cruel. For a whole week I had been nursing a hope, which vanished just as it was about to be fulfilled. I had great difficulty in concealing the misery which overwhelmed me, and the roses with which excitement had painted my cheeks, faded away. Fortunately, the doors of the dining-room were immediately thrown open, and the butler announced that "Madame was served." The general movement prevented my emotion being observed. When everyone was seated, there was an empty place at my right; and that it had been intended for you was demonstrated to me by the sight of your name, written in a round, handsome hand, upon a card bordered with arabesques in brilliant colors, which was placed near the row of glasses. So the irony of destiny was complete. Had it not been for that wretched mischance of the train, I should have had you near me during the whole dinner, and your hand might have touched mine in those thousand little courtesies which the least gallant man is forced to show a woman at table. A few commonplace words, the usual prelude to all conversations, would have been exchanged between us, and then, the ice once broken, our intercourse would have become more intimate, and before long you would have understood the feeling in my heart. Perhaps I would not have displeased you; and, although you had just arrived from Spain, you might possibly have pardoned the rosy fairness of my complexion and the pale gold of my hair. If you had come to that dinner, it would surely have made a vast difference in both your life and mine. You would not have remained a bachelor, and I should have lived, and not been reduced to make my confessions to you from beyond the tomb. The love which you feel for me as a spirit warrants me in believing, without manifesting too much conceit, that you would not have proved insensible to my terrestrial charms; but that was not to be. That unoccupied seat, which isolated me from the other guests, seemed to me symbolic of my fate; it foretold to me fruitless expectations and solitude in the midst of the crowd. And the sinister prediction was only too completely fulfilled.

My neighbor on the left was, I heard afterward, a member of the Academy, and very amiable, in spite of his learning. He tried many times to make me speak, but I responded only in monosyllables, and, moreover, in monosyllables so ill-suited to his questions, that the poor man took me for an idiot, and forsook me to converse with the lady on his other side.

I scarcely touched my lips to the various dishes that were set before me; my heart felt so heavy that I could not eat. The dinner was over at last, and we returned to the drawing-room. There was a perfect hum of conversation—like seeking like—in all sorts of discussions. There was a group of three or four near enough the place where I was sitting to permit me to hear what was said, and your name, spoken by Monsieur d'Aversac, attracted my attention. "That queer Malivert," d'Aversac was saying, "cares for no one but that pacha, and the pacha is equally devoted to him; they are never apart. Mohammed. Mustapha, or whatever his name is, wants to carry him off to Egypt. He talks of offering him a steamer to take him to the first cataracts; but Guy, who is as barbarous as the Turk is civilized, would prefer a canagia, as being more picturesque. The plan pleases Guy, as he says Paris is too cold. He would, on the whole, like to winter in Cairo, and continue there his studies upon Arabian architecture which he begun at the Alhambra; but, if he does go, I am afraid that we shall never see him again, and that he will embrace Islamism, like Hassan, the hero of Namouna."

"He is quite capable of it," answered one of the young men in the group; "he has never been very fond of western civilization."

"Oh, pshaw!" said another; "when he has worn a few odd costumes, taken a dozen vapor baths, bought of the Djellabs one or two slaves and sold them again at a loss, climbed the pyramids, and sketched the flat-nosed profile of the sphinx, he will be glad enough to return to the asphalt of the boulevards, which, after all, is the only place in the universe where life is worth living."

This conversation worried me greatly. You were going away. For how long? How could I find out? Would I be lucky enough to meet you before your departure, so that at least you might carry my image away with you? I no longer dared to believe in any such happiness, after so many baffled hopes.

On my return home I first quieted the fears of my mother, who, from my pallor, thought me ill, as of course she could not suspect what was passing in my mind, and then went to my room to think over the situation. I wondered if the stubbornness with which circumstances had contrived to separate us, was not a secret warning of destiny which it would be dangerous not to obey. Perhaps you would be fatal to me, and I was wrong to persist in my attempts to meet you. My reason alone spoke thus, for my heart rejected the idea, and longed to run all risks for the sake of its love. I felt myself to be irrevocably attached to you, and the bond, so frail in appearance, was stronger than a chain of diamonds. Unfortunately, it bound me alone. "How wretched is woman's lot!" I thought. "Condemned, as she is, to waiting, inaction, silence, she can not without being immodest, manifest her affection; she must submit to the love which she inspires, and never declare that which she feels. From the time my heart awoke, one sentiment alone has reigned there, a sentiment pure, absolute, eternal, and the being who is the object of it will, perhaps, forever remain in ignorance of the fact. How can I make him realize that a young girl, whom he would doubtless love if he could suspect her secret, lives and breathes only for him?"

For a moment I thought of writing you one of those letters that they say an author sometimes receives, in which, under the mask of admiration for his literary ability, sentiments of another nature are allowed to appear, and a non-compromising rendezvous in some public place is hinted at; but my womanly delicacy revolted against employing such means, and I was afraid that you would take me for a blue-stocking who hoped to make use of your influence to have an article accepted by the *Revue des Deux Mondes*.

D'Aversac had spoken the truth. The following week you left for Cairo with your friend, the pacha. Your departure destroyed all hope of our meeting for an indefinite period, and inspired me with a melancholy which I found it almost impossible to hide. All interest in life was gone. I no longer cared to please, and when I went into society, I left the choice of my dress entirely to my maid. What mattered it whether I was pretty or not, since you were not there to see? Nevertheless, I looked attractive enough to be surrounded, like Penelope, with a little court of suitors. Gradually, our house, which had previously been frequented chiefly by friends of my father—sedate, elderly men—became the resort of younger faces. Regularly, on our reception days, appeared handsome dandies, without a hair out of place, who had devoted unparalleled attention to the tying of their cravats, and who honored me with passionate, appealing glances. Some, during the pauses in the dances—for sometimes we had an improvised dance at our receptions—uttered deep sighs, which I, without being in the slightest degree touched, attributed to the scantness of their breath. Some, more bold than the rest, hazarded moral and poetical reflections upon the happiness of a well-assorted union, and pretended that they were made expressly for the felicity of married life. How perfect they all were in their dress, their manners, and their delicate thoughtfulness! The perfume of their hair came from Houbigant's, and their evening clothes were built by Renard. What more could the most romantic and exacting imagination demand? And so these exquisite young men were filled with artless surprise at the slight impression they produced upon me.

There were some serious suitors among them. My hand was more than once asked of my parents; but, when I was consulted, I always answered in the negative, finding excellent reasons for my refusal. My father and mother never attempted to influence me; I was so young that there was no need of urging an immediate marriage, which might be repented later. One day, my mother, believing that I had formed some secret attachment, questioned me, and I was on the point of acknowledging all to her, but a feeling of unconquerable diffidence prevented me doing so. The love which I alone felt, and which you knew nothing of, seemed to me a secret which I ought not to betray without your consent. It was not mine alone, but half yours. I therefore kept silence, and, leaving all else out of the question, how could I confess, even to the most indulgent of mothers, this foolish love—for so it would appear to her—which had its origin in a childish impression formed in the parlor of a convent, which had been obstinately cherished in my heart, and which there was nothing from a human point of view to justify? If I had spoken, my mother, for there was nothing culpable or impossible in my choice, would have doubtless attempted to bring us together, and would have found means to make you declare yourself by one of those subterfuges which, on such occasions, the most honest and truthful women in the world know how to employ. But any such proceeding shocked my idea of maidenly modesty. I did not wish any interference between you and me. You must notice me and divine my thoughts of your own accord. Under such conditions only could I be happy, and forgive myself for being the first to love; I could not have supported the thought without some such consolation and excuse. It was neither pride nor coquetry that demanded it, but pure, womanly dignity.

Time passed, and you returned from Egypt. People began to speak of your attentions to Madame d'Ymbercourt, and to declare that you were very much in love with her. I became alarmed, and wanted to see my rival, and one night she was pointed out to me in her box at the Italiens. I tried to judge her impartially, and came to the conclusion that she was beautiful, but that her beauty was devoid of either charm or delicacy, like the copy of an ancient statue made by an ordinary sculptor. She was a perfect type of the ideal of the commonplace, and I was surprised that she should possess any attraction for you. Her regular features were devoid of any individual expression, any original grace, any unexpected charm. As she appeared one day, so she would always appear. In spite of all that was said, I was too proud to be jealous of such a woman. But the rumors of your approaching marriage became more extended. As bad news always reaches the ears of those most interested, I was kept informed of everything in connection with you and Madame d'Ymbercourt. One said that the first banns had been published, and another that the exact day had been fixed for the ceremony. I had no means to ascertain how true or false these reports might be, but as everyone considered that the matter had been arranged, and that it was most suitable in all respects, I was forced to believe it also. Still, the secret voice of my heart declared that you did not love Madame d'Ymbercourt. Loveless marriages are often made for reasons of convenience: to have an establishment, to obtain a recognized position in the world, or because of the need of domestic peace one feels after the dissipations and excitements of youth. I sunk into profound despair. I saw my life ended, and the pure dreams I had cherished so long vanished forever. I no longer had the right even to hold you in the most secret recesses of my heart, for as, in the sight of God and man, you belonged to another, the thought of you, hitherto innocent, would, under these circumstances, become culpable, and there had been nothing in my girlish love which my guardian angel need have blushed for. Once, I saw you in the park riding beside Madame d'Ymbercourt's barouche, but I drew back into the corner of the carriage, taking as much care to hide from you as I had once taken to be seen by you. This fleeting vision was the last.

I was scarcely seventeen. What was to become of me? How could I live out an existence thus ruined in the very beginning? Must I trust to my parents' wisdom and accept a husband of their choosing? That is what, under such circumstances, many young girls, separated, like me, by untoward accidents from the object of their heart's desire, have consented to do. But such a proceeding seemed to me inconstant and disloyal. As my first and only thought of love had been for you, I could never belong to anyone but you, and any other union appeared to me a sort of crime. My heart had only one page; upon that page you had unwittingly written your name, and no other should replace it. Your marriage would not excuse infidelity on my part. You were unconscious of my love, and free, but I was bound. The idea of being the wife of another inspired me with unconquerable horror, and, after I had refused many suitors, knowing the position of an unmarried woman in society to be very disagreeable, I determined to leave the world and become a nun. God alone could shield my grief, and perhaps console it.

CHAPTER XI

IRREVOCABILITY

I THEREFORE entered, as a novice, the convent of the Sisters of Mercy, in spite of the remonstrances and entreaties of my parents; what they said touched me deeply, but did not shake my resolution. However firm one's determination may be, the moment of final separation is a terrible one. A grating at the end of a long passage marks the boundary between the world and the cloister. To the threshold of this grating, which no profane foot must cross, the family can accompany the maiden who is to devote herself to God. After the last embraces and kisses, witnessed impassively by the sombre, veiled figures of the nuns behind the grating, the door is opened just enough to admit of the passage of the novice, whom shadowy arms seem to draw within, and closed again with an iron clang, which reëchoes in the silence of the corridors like the hollow rumblings of thunder. The sound of the closing of a coffin-lid is not more mournful—strikes no more painfully upon the heart. I felt my cheeks paling, and an icy chill enfolded me. I had taken my first step out of the world, which henceforth would be a closed book for me. I had entered that cold region where passions are extinguished, where memories are effaced, and where news from outside never enters. Nothing exists therein except the thought of God, which is deemed sufficient to fill the frightful void and the silence which reigns there, as profound as that of the tomb. I can speak of all this now that I am dead.

My religion, although sincere and fervent, did not reach the point of mystical exaltation. A human motive, rather than an imperious call of duty, had forced me to seek peace in the shadows of the cloister. My heart was shipwrecked, broken upon a hidden rock, and the drama of my life, which no one was aware of, had ended tragically. In the beginning, I felt what is known among those who have given up their lives to religion, as the last temptations of the flesh, the struggle of the world to recapture its prey—a weariness, a hopelessness, a regret, a vague discouragement; but these feelings soon ceased to trouble me. The unending round of prayers and religious exercises, the regularity of the life, and the monotony of rules, calculated to conquer all rebellious feelings of soul and body, turned toward heaven thoughts which persisted in dwelling too much upon the world. Your image lived ever in my heart, but I forced myself to turn toward God the love I felt for you.

The convent of the Sisters of Mercy

is not one of those romantic cloisters such as society women imagine as a shelter from the pangs of disappointed love. There are no rounded arches, no columns festooned with ivy, no ray of the moon penetrating through a broken rose-window, and casting its light upon the inscription of a tomb; no chapel, with stained-glass windows, slender pillars, and arches open to the sky, which is such an excellent subject for a stage picture. The religious sentiment which seeks to uphold Christianity by its picturesque and poetical side, would find here no theme for descriptions in the style of Chateau-briand. The building is modern, and there is not one obscure corner on which to found a legend. There is nothing to please the eye; no ornament, no artistic embellishment, no pictures, no statues; nothing but rigid, severe lines. A glaring light illumines the white ceilings and walls of the long corridors, pierced at regular intervals by the doors of the cells. Everything is gloomy and severe, with no attention paid to beauty, and no appeal to the senses through form or color. The plainness and ugliness of the architecture have the advantage of offering no distractions to minds which should be absorbed in thoughts of God. The windows, placed very high in the walls, are barred with iron, and through the openings nothing can be seen except patches of sky, blue or gray as the case may be. It is like being within a fortress raised against the temptations of the world. That the walls are solid is sufficient; beauty would be superfluous.

About half of the chapel is open to the devotions of the outside public. A large grating, stretching from the floor to the roof, and hung with thick green curtains, interposes, like the portcullis of a walled town, between the body of the church and the choir reserved for the nuns. Wooden stalls, with plain mouldings, worn shiny by friction, are arranged on each side of the choir. At the back are placed three chairs for the mother superior and her two assistants. Here, to listen to the divine office, came the sisters, with lowered veils and long, trailing black robes, upon which was stitched a broad band of white stuff, like the cross on a funeral-pall, with the arms cut off. From the latticed gallery, where the novices were, I beheld them bow to the superior and to the altar, kneel, prostrate themselves, and disappear in their stalls. At the elevation of the Host, the curtains were partially drawn aside, to enable them to see the priest consummating the holy sacrifice at the altar placed opposite the choir. The fervor of the worship gratified me, and strengthened my resolution to break with the world, to which it was not yet too late to return. In that atmosphere of ecstacy and incense, with the quivering lights of the candles casting their pale rays upon the prostrate forms, my soul seemed to push forth wings and to rise higher and higher toward the ethereal regions. The ceiling of the chapel was painted blue and gold, and, as in an opening of the heavens, I fancied I could see, over the edge of a luminous cloud, angels leaning smilingly toward me and beckoning me to come to them, and I no longer perceived the coarse tints of the frescoing, the poor taste of the chandelier, and the ugliness of the black-framed pictures.

The time to pronounce my vows drew

near, and I was overwhelmed with those words of flattering encouragement, those delicate attentions, those mystical caresses, those prophecies of perfect felicity which they lavish in convents upon novices about to consummate the sacrifice and consecrate themselves forever to the Lord. I did not need such support, and I was ready to walk to the altar with a firm step. Forced, as I believed, to renounce you, there was in the world nothing that I regretted, except the love of my parents, and my determination to forsake it forever was unalterable.

The probationary period was at last ended, and the solemn day arrived. The convent, usually so peaceful, was full of excitement, suppressed by the severe monastic discipline. The nuns moved about the corridors, forgetting at times the phantom-like step which the regulations commend, for the taking of the veil is a great event. A new lamb is to join the fold, and the whole flock is in a state of excitement. The worldly garments in which the novice is arrayed for the last time, are a subject of curiosity, delight, and astonishment. The satin, lace, pearls, and ornaments, intended to represent the pomps and vanities of Satan, are admired with something approaching dread. Thus adorned, I was conducted to the choir. The superior and her assistants were in their places, and in their stalls knelt the nuns in prayer. I pronounced the sacramental words, which forever separated me from the living, and, as the ritual of the ceremony exacts, I thrust away with my foot the rich velvet cushion upon which, at certain moments, it had been my duty to kneel. I tore off my necklace and bracelets, and cast aside all my ornaments, in token of my renunciation of vanity and luxury. I abjured all womanly coquetry, and this was not difficult, since I had not the right to make myself beautiful in order to please you.

Then came the most dreaded and most mournful scene of this religious drama—the moment when the new sister is shorn of her hair, a vanity henceforth useless. It recalls the last toilet of one condemned to the guillotine, except that in this case the victim is innocent, or, at all events, purified by repentance. Although I had very sincerely and from the bottom of my heart abjured all human attachment, the pallor of death overspread my face when the steel of the scissors clashed in my long, fair hair, upheld by one of the nuns. The golden locks fell in thick masses upon the flags of the sacristy, where they had taken me, and I regarded the shower with a vacant eye. I was stunned and filled with a secret horror. The cold metal, as it grazed my neck, made me tremble nervously as at the contact of an axe. My teeth chattered, and the prayer I tried to utter would not pass my lips. An icy perspiration, like that of the last agony, bathed my temples. My vision became blurred, and the lamp suspended before the altar of the Virgin seemed to fade away in a fog. My knees gave way beneath me, and I had just time to cry, stretching forth my arms as if to seize my escaping senses, "I am dying!"

They gave me salts to inhale, and when I recovered, as dazzled by the light of day as a ghost emerging from the grave, I found myself in the arms of the sisters, who were supporting me with placid gentleness, as if accustomed to exhibitions of weakness upon such occasions.

"It is nothing," said the youngest of the sisters, compassionately. "The worst is over; commend yourself to the Holy Virgin, and all will be well; the same thing happened to me when I pronounced my vows. It is a final effort of the Evil One."

Two sisters clothed me in the black robe of the order and invested me with the white stole; then, leading me back to the choir, they cast over my cropped head the veil, the symbolical shroud which made me dead to the world, and henceforth visible to God alone. A pious legend, which I had heard related, declares that a request made of heaven, when first enveloped by the folds of the funereal veil, will be granted. When the veil fell over me, I implored of Divine Goodness, if there was nothing wrong in such a request, that after my death my love should be revealed to you. Immediately a sudden, inexplicable happiness filled my being. I knew my prayer was answered, and I felt a profound relief, for this had been my greatest trouble, the thing which had hurt me and made me suffer day and night, like hair-cloth worn beneath the garments. I had indeed renounced you in this world, but my heart rebelled against guarding its secret eternally.

Shall I tell you of my life in the convent? Day followed day, one precisely like the other. Every hour had its prayer, its devotion, its task to be fulfilled; life marched on with a regular step toward eternity, happy to approach nearer and nearer its end. And yet the apparent peacefulness and calm covered sometimes much weariness, sadness, and feverish trouble. The thoughts, although curbed by prayer and meditation, will persist in flying into forbidden channels. A homesick longing for the world seizes upon you. You regret your liberty, your family, nature; you think of the broad horizons flooded with light, the meadows starred with flowers, the hills with their wooded undulations, the blue mists which float in the evening over the fields, the highway with its procession of carriages, the river dotted with boats, life, movement, gay laughter, constant variety. You long to move, to run, to fly; you envy the bird its wings; you are uneasy in your living tomb; you overleap, in fancy, the high walls of the convent, and your thoughts return to the places you loved, to the scenes of your infancy and youth, which live again with a magical clearness of detail. You make useless plans of happiness, forgetting that the bolt of the irrevocable has fastened you in forever. The most pious hearts are exposed to these temptations, these memories, these mirages, which the will repels and prayer attempts to dissipate, but which rise again in the silence and solitude of the cell, within the four white walls which have for their sole decoration a crucifix of black wood. My mind, which at first had been completely filled with religious fervor, reverted to the past with ever-increasing frequency and tenderness. Regret for a lost happiness oppressed my heart with sadness, and the silent tears would often roll down my cheeks, without my being aware of it. Sometimes at night I wept in my dreams, and in the morning I would find my rude pillow bedewed with the bitter drops. In happier dreams, I fancied myself returning from a drive, and mounting, side by side with you, the white steps of a villa flecked with the bluish shadows of the great trees surrounding it. I was your wife, and your eyes rested upon me with a tender, protecting glance. All obstacles between us had vanished. But I was horrified at these false, joyful visions, which I shrank from as from a sin. I confessed and did penance. I lay awake in prayer and struggled against sleep in order to be free from these wicked illusions, but they would always return.

The struggle weakened me, and I soon began to show the effects of it. Without being ill, I was delicate. The harsh conventual life, with its fasts, its abstinences, its mortifications of the flesh; the fatigue of the nocturnal services, the sepulchral chill of the church, the rigors of a long winter, from which I was but poorly protected by a thin frock of serge; and, more than all this, the combats of the soul, the alternations of exaltation and dejection, of doubt and fervent belief, the fear of being unable to present to the divine Bridegroom anything but a heart disturbed by a human attachment, and so incur the vengeance of Heaven, for God is a jealous God, and will accept no divided love; perhaps, also, the jealously with which Madame d'Ymbercourt inspired me; all these things had a disastrous effect upon my health. My complexion assumed the color of wax; my eyes, looking enormous in my thin face, burned feverishly in their hollow sockets; the veins of my temples formed a net-work of blue lines, and my lips lost their fresh, bright color. My hands became as delicate, transparent, and pale as those of a ghost. Death is not considered in the convent as it is in the world; within the cloister it is hailed with joy, as the deliverance of the soul, the open door of heaven, the end of trouble and the beginning of happiness. God prefers to take to himself those he loves, and He shortens their stay in the valley of misery and tears. Prayers and hymns, full of hope are chanted at the bedside of the dying nun, whom the sacraments purify from all earthly stain, and who is already transfigured by the light of the other world. To her comrades she is an object to be envied, not to be deplored.

I felt no fear as the fatal hour approached; I hoped that God would pardon my one love, so chaste, so pure, so involuntary, and which I had striven earnestly to forget from the moment it had appeared guilty in my eyes; and that He would receive me into His grace. I soon became so weak that one day I fainted at my devotions, and, covered with my veil, lay extended like one dead, with my face against the floor; the nuns at first took no notice of my stillness, which they took for a religious trance; but, when they saw that I did not rise, two of them leaned over me, and raising my inert body, led, or rather carried, me to my cell, which I was destined never again to leave. I remained long hours lying dressed upon my bed, passing my rosary through my emaciated fingers, lost in some vague meditation, and wondering if my wish would be fulfilled after my death. I grew visibly weaker and weaker, and the remedies they gave me, althrough they diminished my suffering, could not cure me;

and, indeed, I had no desire to recover, for I had, beyond this life, a hope long cherished, and the possible realization of which inspired me with a curious longing for the world beyond the grave.

My passage from this world to the other was very peaceful. All the bonds of mind and matter were broken, except a thread a thousand times more filmy than those gossamer filaments that float in the air on beautiful autumn days, and this thread alone detained my soul, ready to spread its wings in the ether of the infinite. Alternate lights and shadows, like the intermittent gleams of an expiring night-lamp, flickered before my glazing eyes. The prayers murmured by the nuns kneeling about me, and in which I forced myself mentally to join, reached me only as confused hummings, vague and distant mutterings. My deadened senses discerned nothing earthly, and my thoughts, abandoning my brain, floated dubiously, in a fantastical dream, between the material and the immaterial worlds, no longer attached to the one and not yet having reached the other, while my fingers, colorless as ivory, picked mechanically at the coverings on the bed. Finally, the last moments approached, and they extended me on the ground, with a bag of ashes beneath my head, to die in the humble attitude befitting a poor servant of God rendering her dust to the dust from which she sprung. My breathing became more and more difficult; I was stifling; a feeling of terrible anguish gripped my breast; the instinct of nature still fought against destruction; but soon the unavailing struggle ceased, and in a feeble sigh my soul escaped from my lips.

CHAPTER XII

SPARKLING DUST

No human words can render the sensations of a soul which, delivered from its bodily prison, passes from this life to the other, from time to eternity, from the finite to the infinite. My body, motionless, and already clothed with that ashen pallor which is the livery of death, lay upon its funeral couch, surrounded by the praying nuns, and I was no more a part of it than the butterfly is a part of the chrysalis, the empty shell, the shapeless husk, which it abandons to open its young wings in the hitherto unknown and suddenly revealed light. At first there was an interval of utter darkness, to which succeeded a burst of splendor, an opening of the horizon and a disappearance of all boundaries and obstacles, that filled me with indescribable ecstacy. The sudden birth of new senses made me understand mysteries which are beyond the ken of earthly faculties. Freed from that clay which is subject to the laws of gravity, and which until so lately had weighed me down, I bounded enthusiastically into the unfathomable ether. Distance no longer existed, and I had but to express the desire, to be wherever I wished. With a flight more rapid than that of light, I traced broad circles in the boundless azure of space, as if to take possession of the vastness, crossing in my path swarms of souls and spirits.

A waving light, brilliant as diamond dust, formed the atmosphere; each grain of this sparkling dust, as I soon perceived, was a soul. Through the light quivered currents, eddies, ripples, waves, as in that impalpable dust spread upon harmonic tables to show the vibrations of sound, and all these movements caused an ever-changing, rippling flash throughout the splendor. The greatest number which mathematicians can imagine, reaching far into the depths of infinity, with its millions of zeros adding their enormous power to the initial figure, would give not even an approximate idea of the appalling multitude of souls which composed this light, as different from material light as day differs from night.

In addition to the souls who had already passed through the trials of life since the creation of our world and that of the other universes, were the expectant souls, the virgin souls, who were waiting their turn to become incarnate, upon a planet of one system or another. There were enough of them to people for millions of years all these universes which proceeded from God, and which in His own good time He will draw back to Himself.

These souls, although dissimilar in essence and aspect, according to the world which they were destined to inhabit, and in spite of the infinite variety of their characteristics, all recalled the divine type, and were made in the image of their Creator. The celestial spark was the essential element of them all. Some of them were white like the diamond, others of the color of the ruby, the emerald, the sapphire, the topaz, and the amethyst. In the absence of other terms within your comprehension, I employ these names of stones, vile pebbles, opaque crystals, as black as ink, the most brilliant of which would be only stains if placed against that background of living splendors.

Now and again passed some great angel bearing an order from God to a remote portion of the infinite, and making the universes oscillate with the palpitations of his huge wings. The milky way rippled through the heavens, a river of liquefied suns. The stars, which I saw in their true form and grandeur, such as it would be impossible for the imagination of man to conceive, blazed with tremendous, savage brilliancy; behind these, and in the openings between them, in more and more vertiginous depths of space, I perceived others and still others, so that the background of the firmament was nowhere visible, and I might have believed myself enclosed in the centre of an immense sphere, all constellated within with planets. Their radiance—white, yellow, blue, green, red—reached an intensity and a brilliancy which would make the light of our sun appear black, but which the eyes of my soul supported without difficulty. I floated about, ascending, descending, traversing in a second millions of leagues through glimmerings of auroras, iris-like reflections, radiations of gold and silver, diamond-like phosphorescences, starry flashes, in all the magnificence, blissfulness, and rapture of the divine light. I heard the music of the spheres, an echo of which reached the ear of Pythagoras; the mysterious numbers, the pivots of the universe, marked the rhythm. With a roar of harmony powerful as the thunder and sweet as the music of the flute, our world rolled slowly in space about its sun, and with a sweeping glance I embraced the planets from Mercury to Neptune, as, accompanied by their satellites, they described their ellipses. A flash of intuition revealed to me the names by which they are known in Heaven. I understood their structure, their use, their aim; no secret of their vast and wonderful life was hidden from me. I read as in an open book the poem of God, which has suns for its letters. Would that I were permitted to explain to you a few of its pages! But you still live in an inferior, shadowy region, and your eyes would be blinded with the blaze of brilliancy.

Still, in spite of the ineffable beauty of this marvelous spectacle, I had not forgotten the earth, the poor abode I had but recently quitted. My love, conqueror of death, had followed me beyond the tomb, and I saw with a divine joy, an ecstatic rapture, that you loved no one, that your soul was free, and that you would be mine forever. I knew then that my instinct had spoken truly. We were predestined, the one for the other. Our souls formed that celestial couple which, when united, makes an angel; but the two halves of the supreme whole, to be united in immortality, must have sought each other in life, have recognized one another under the veils of the flesh, and in spite of all trials, obstacles, and distractions. I alone had felt the presence of the sister-soul, and, impelled by the instinct which never deceives, had attempted to join it. With you, the clearness of vision was much less acute, and served only to put you on your guard against ordinary ties and coarse attachments. You understood that you had not yet encountered the heart that was made for yours, and, with passionate fires glowing under an apparent coldness, you held yourself in reserve for a more lofty ideal. Thanks to the grace which was accorded me, I could give you a knowledge of the love you had been ignorant of during my life, and I hoped to inspire you with a desire to follow me to the sphere I inhabit. I had no regrets. What is even the happiest human union in comparison with the rapture two souls enjoy in the eternal embrace of divine love? Until the arrival of the supreme moment, my task was limited to prevent the world capturing you in its snares, and thus forever separating you from me. Marriage binds in this world and the next, but you did not love Madame d'Ymbercourt; my powers as a spirit permitted me to read your heart, and I had nothing to fear in that direction; still, as the ideal you had dreamed of did not appear, you might allow yourself, through indolence and discouragement, to be drawn into this commonplace union.

Leaving the luminous zones, I descended to the earth, which I saw moving beneath me, dragging in its orbit its foggy atmosphere and its girdles of cloud. I found you without difficulty, and became an invisible partaker of your life, reading your thoughts and influencing them without your knowledge. By my presence, which you did not suspect, I smothered the ideas, desires, and caprices which might have turned you aside from the goal toward which I was directing you. Little by little I disengaged your soul from all earthly shackles; to better guard you, I cast about your apartments a vague enchantment which attached you to them. It was like a mute, impalpable caress, which filled you with an inexplicable feeling of content; it seemed to you, without your exactly realizing it, that your happiness was enclosed between those four walls. A lover who, on a stormy night, reads his favorite poet before a comfortable fire, while his heart's idol sleeps, buried in sweet dreams, in the shadowy alcove, has the same feeling of domestic felicity as he enjoys the isolation of love; there is nothing outside which is worth the trouble of crossing the threshold; for him the whole world is shut up in that one room. I was obliged to prepare you gradually for my appearance, and, in a hidden manner, to establish relations with you; communication between a spirit and an uninitiated mortal is a difficult thing. A fathomless abyss separates this world from the other. I had succeeded in crossing this abyss; but that was not enough. I must render myself visible to your eyes, which were still covered with a bandage, seeing nothing of the spiritual through the density of matter.

Madame d'Ymbercourt continued to cherish hopes of obtaining you for a husband, used all her fascinations to attract you to her house, and tormented you with her attentions. I substituted my will for your dormant thoughts, and made you answer that note from the lady in a way that betrayed your real sentiments, and caused you so much surprise. An idea of the supernatural was awakened in you, and, placed more on the alert, you began to be aware that a mysterious power was mingled in your life. The sigh I breathed when, in spite of my warning, you determined to go out, although faint and uncertain as the vibration of an Æolian harp, troubled you deeply, and inspired in your heart a certain occult sympathy. You detected in the sigh an accent of feminine suffering. I could not yet manifest myself to you in a more definite manner, for you were not sufficiently freed from the blind thralldom of matter; and so I appeared to the Baron de Féroë, a disciple of Swedenborg, to request him to say to you those mysterious words, which placed you on your guard against the dangers you were running, and awoke in you a desire to penetrate into the world of spirits, whither my love summoned you. You know the rest. Must I return to the regions above, or remain here below, and will the spirit be more fortunate than the woman?

Here the impelling force which had caused Malivert's pen to move along the paper stopped, and the young man's thoughts, suspended by Spirite's influence, again took possession of his brain. He read what he had unconsciously written, and became confirmed in his resolution to love only and unto death the charming being who had suffered through him in her short sojourn upon earth. "But what will be our relations?" he thought. "Will Spirite bear me away to the clime she inhabits, or will she hover about me, visible to me alone? Will she answer me if I speak to her, and how shall I understand her?"

These questions were not easy to answer, and so, after a short reflection, Malivert abandoned them and fell into a long reverie, which was broken by Jack announcing the Baron de Féroë.

The two friends shook hands, and the Swede with the pale yellow moustache threw himself back in an armchair.

"Guy," he said, stretching out his feet on the fender, "I have come with scant ceremony to ask if I may breakfast with you. I started out early this morning, and, as I was passing your house, the fancy seized me to make you a call, almost as early as your butcher or grocer."

"You did right, Baron; it was a delightful idea," answered Malivert, ringing for Jack and ordering him to serve breakfast at once, and lay two covers.

"I should say, my dear Guy, that you had not been to bed at all," said the Baron, regarding the candles which had burned down to their sockets and the sheets of paper scattered upon the table. "Have you been working all night? Is it soon to appear? What is it, a novel or a poem?"

"Perhaps a poem," responded Malivert, "but I did not compose it. I only held the pen under an inspiration superior to mine."

"I understand," said the Baron; "Apollo dictated, Homer wrote; such verses are the best."

"This poem, if it is one, is not in verse, and it was not whispered in my ear by a mythological god."

"Ah! pardon me! I forgot that you are an enemy of the classical school, and that when talking to you one must banish Apollo and the muses to the pages of Chompré's dictionary or the epistles to Emilie."

"My dear Baron, since you have been, in some sort, my expounder of mysteries and initiator into the supernatural, there is no reason why I should hide from you that those sheets which you took for *copy,* as the printers say, were dictated to me, last night and the night before, by the spirit who is interested in me and who seems to have known you on earth, as your name is mentioned in her recital."

"You have used pen and paper as a medium," observed the Baron, "because the relations are not yet firmly established between you and the spirit who visits you; but you will soon have no need of such slow and gross means of communication. Your souls will be penetrated with thoughts and desires, without any external sign."

At this moment Jack announced that breakfast was served. Malivert was completely unnerved by the strange events that had happened, the love from beyond the tomb which Don Juan might have envied him, and scarcely touched the dishes set before him. Baron de Féroë ate, however, but with the moderation of a Swedenborgian, for the one who lives in communication with spirits must mortify the flesh as much as possible.

"This is capital tea that you have," said the Baron; "green tea with white points, gathered after the first spring rains and which the mandarins drink without sugar, sipping it slowly from cups covered with net-work, so as not to burn the fingers. It is the drink of all others for dreamers and thinkers, for its stimulus is purely intellectual. Nothing is a more gentle dispeller of dullness, or better disposes one for the vision of things unseen by the common herd. Since you are now about to live in an immaterial sphere

I recommend you to drink frequently of the beverage. But you are not listening to me, my dear Guy, and I can understand your inattention. So novel a situation must naturally preoccupy your mind."

"Yes, I confess it," answered Malivert. "I seem to be half intoxicated, and I wonder every moment if I am not the victim of some hallucination."

"Drive away such ideas, which if persisted in, would put the spirit to flight forever; do not seek to explain what is inexplicable, but yield with absolute faith and submission to the influence which guides you. The least doubt would bring about a rupture and cause you never-ending regret. The permission for two souls, that have never met in life, to be united in Heaven is one rarely accorded; profit by it, and prove yourself worthy of such happiness."

"I will be worthy of it, be assured, and I will not a second time inflict upon Spirite the sorrow I made her suffer, innocently to be sure, while she was in this world. By the way, in the story she dictated to me, she did not tell me the name she bore when on earth."

"Do you care to know it? Go to Père Lachaise, climb the hill, and near the chapel you will see a tomb of white marble, upon which is carved a cross adorned with a wreath of roses, the masterpiece of a celebrated sculptor. In the medallion formed by the wreath is a short inscription, which will furnish you with the information which I am not formally authorized to give you. The tomb, in its mute language, will speak in my place, although, in my opinion, your curiosity is a useless and foolish one. What matters an earthly name when an eternal love is in question? But you are not as yet wholly detached from human ideas, which, after all, is not remarkable; it is only a short time since you set your foot beyond the circle that encloses ordinary life."

Without further words, the Baron took his leave; and Guy dressed, ordered his carriage and drove in turn to the most celebrated florists to find a spray of white lilac. It was the depth of winter, and it was difficult to obtain what he wanted. But in Paris there is no such thing as the impossible, when one has money enough to pay for it; so he found it at last, and mounted the hill with beating heart and moistened eyes.

A few flakes of snow, which had not yet melted, glistened like silver tears upon the leaves of the yews, cypresses, firs, and ivy, and lay in white spots upon the ornamentation of the tombs, the tops and the arms of the melancholy crosses. The sky was cloudy, of a yellowish gray, heavy as lead—a most appropriate sky to overhang a cemetery—and the harsh wind groaned through the narrow alleys of tombs, built to fit the dead.

Malivert soon reached the chapel, and perceived not far from there, all framed in with Irish-ivy, the white tomb, which a slight covering of snow rendered whiter still. He leaned upon the grating, and read this inscription engraven in the centre of the wreath of roses: "Lavinia d'Aufideni, in religion Sister Philomène, died at eighteen years." He pushed his arm through the bars and dropped his branch of lilac upon the inscription; then, although sure of pardon, he remained some minutes near the tomb in dreamy contemplation, his heart heavy with remorse; was he not the murderer of that pure dove that had so soon taken its flight to Heaven?

While he stood leaning against the grating, his hot tears falling upon the cold snow which shrouded the virginal tomb, in the heavy curtains of gray clouds opened a clear space. Like a light dawning through thicknesses of gauze gradually drawn aside, the disk of the sun appeared, of a pallid white, and more like the moon than the orb of day—a sun befitting the dead! Little by little the clouds drew apart, and through the opening escaped a long ray, visible against the sombre background of the fog and casting a sheen upon the mica of the snow, which rested like a winter's dew upon the spray of white lilac and the wreath of marble roses.

In the luminous quivering of the ray, wherein floated frozen atoms, Malivert thought he could distinguish a graceful, white form, which rose from the tomb like the slender smoke from a silver dish of burning perfume, enveloped in waving folds of gauzy drapery, like the robe in which painters clothe angels. The figure waved its hand to him; and then a cloud passed over the sun, and the vision vanished.

Guy turned away, murmuring the name of Lavinia d'Aufideni, reëntered his carriage, and returned to Paris, peopled with living beings who do not suspect that they are dead, lacking as they do, the inner life.

Chapter XIII

TWO PORTIONS

From that day Malivert's existence was divided into two distinct portions—the one real, the other ideal. To all outward appearances, he was in no way changed; he went to the club and into society; he was seen in the Bois de Boulogne, and upon the boulevards. If any interesting performance took place at the theatres, he was present; and to see him correctly dressed, perfectly booted and gloved, mingling with the stream of human life, no one would have suspected that the young man was in communication with spirits, and that, after the opera, he obtained glimpses of the mysterious depths of the invisible universe. And yet, to anyone who examined him closely, he would have appeared graver, paler, thinner, and as if spiritualized. The expression of his face was no longer the same; when in repose, his features bore a look of haughty beatitude. Fortunately, the world is not observing, unless it is for its interest to be so, and Malivert's secret was unsuspected.

On the evening of the day he visited the cemetery and learned the earthly name of Spirite, while waiting a manifestation he was exerting all the strength of his will to bring about, he heard, like drops of rain falling into a silver basin, the tinkling of a scale upon the piano. There was no one there; but marvels no longer astonished Malivert. A few notes were struck in a manner to command attention and awaken curiosity. Guy kept his eyes fixed upon the piano, and little by little appeared, in a luminous vapor, the exquisite, shadowy figure of a young girl. The image was at first so transparent that the objects beyond it could be clearly distinguished, as one sees the bottom of a lake through limpid water. Without being in any way material, it then became sufficiently condensed to have the appearance of a living being, but so delicate, so intangible, so ethereal, that it resembled rather the reflection of a body in a mirror than the body itself. There are certain sketches by Prud'hon—scarcely more than suggestions, with faint, blurred outlines, full of lights and shades, as if surrounded by a twilight mist, and the white draperies of which seem made of moonbeams—which can give a distant idea of the graceful apparition seated before Malivert's piano. Her fingers, of a pink-tipped pallor, wandered over the ivory keys, like white butterflies, barely grazing them, but evoking sound by that light contact—so light that it would not have ruffled a feather. The notes, without being struck, rung out of themselves when the luminous hands floated above them. A long, white robe, of a delicate fabric, a thousand times finer than those tissues of India which can be drawn through a ring, fell in luxuriant folds about her, and lay around her feet in billows of snowy foam. Her head was bent a little forward, as if she were reading a score of music opened upon the rack, an attitude which revealed the back of the neck, with its little wayward, golden curls, and the polished, opaline shoulders, whose whiteness melted into that of the robe. Upon her hair, which waved and pulsated as if stirred by a breath, was a small coronet, with starry points. From where Malivert sat, were visible an ear and a part of the cheek, so fresh, rosy, and velvety that the tinting of a peach would have appeared coarse in comparison. It was Lavinia, or Spirite, to preserve the name which has hitherto borne in this story. She turned her head for a second, to make sure that Guy was attentive, and that she might begin. Her blue eyes burned with a tender lustre and a celestial sweetness that penetrated Guy's heart. In the look of the angel lingered still something of the young girl.

The piece that she played was the work of a great master, one of those inspirations where genius seems to divine the infinite, and which now powerfully express the secret longings of the soul, and now recall the paradise whence it was driven. In it sighed unspeakable melancholy, was poured forth ardent prayer, resounded a hollow murmur, the last revolt of pride cast down from light into darkness. All these sentiments Spirite rendered with a power which would make one forget Chopin, Liszt, and Thalberg, those magicians of the pianoforte. It seemed to Guy that he was listening to music for the first time. A new art was revealed to him, and a thousand ideas, hitherto unknown, took possession of his soul; the notes awakened in him vibrations of thought so vague, and yet so intense, that he fancied he must have experienced them in some previous life, since forgotten. Not only did Spirite render all the thoughts of the master, but she expressed the ideal of which he had dreamed, and which it is not always permitted to human infirmity to atain; she completed genius, perfected perfection, added to the absolute.

Guy rose and advanced toward the piano, with the unconscious movements of a somnambulist, and paused, his elbow resting on the top of the instrument, and his eyes plunged passionately into those of Spirite.

The expression upon Spirite's countenance was sublime. Her head was raised and thrown a little backward, revealing her face, illumined with a sort of ecstacy. Inspiration and love glowed with supernatural brilliancy in her upraised eyes. Her parted lips disclosed a row of shining pearls, and her neck, blue-veined like those of the frescoed heads of Guido, had the gentle poise of a dove. The woman diminished and the angel increased, until the intensity of the light radiated from her figure was so vivid that Malivert was forced to turn aside his head.

Spirite perceived the movement, and in a voice sweeter and more harmonious than the music she was playing, murmured: "Poor fellow! I forgot that you are still confined in your terrestrial prison, and your eyes can not support the feeblest ray of the true light. Later, I will show myself to you as I am in the sphere where you shall follow me. Now, the shadow of my mortal form must suffice to manifest my presence to you, and in this guise you can contemplate me without danger."

By imperceptible transitions, she passed from supernatural to natural beauty. The Psyche wings, which had fluttered an instant on her white shoulders faded away.

Lavinia reappeared through Spirite, a little more vaporous, but with sufficient reality to make the illusion complete.

She had ceased playing, and was regarding Malivert, who stood before her; a slight smile wandered over her lips, a smile of celestial mockery and divine mischief, as if she were laughing at human weakness, at the same time that she sympathized with it; her eyes, the brilliancy of which was purposely decreased, still expressed the tenderest love, but such as a chaste young girl might have allowed herself to show to the man she was about to marry. For some minutes, Malivert could well believe that he was with the Lavinia who had sought him so constantly during life, and from whom the sarcasm of destiny had always separated him. Fascinated, breathless with love, and forgetting that the form before him was but a shade, he advanced and, by an instinctive movement, tried to take one of Spirite's hands, which still rested upon the keys, with the intention of raising it to his lips; but his fingers closed together without clasping anything, as if they had passed through a fog.

Although she had nothing to fear. Spirite recoiled with a gesture of offended modesty; but almost immediately her angelic smile reappeared, and she raised her transparent, roseate hand to the lips of the young man, who felt an impression of a vague freshness and a delicate, delicious perfume.

"I forgot," she said, in a voice which did not express itself in words, but which Guy felt resound in his heart, "I forgot that I am no longer a young girl, but a soul, a shade, an impalpable vapor, possessing nothing of the senses of human beings; and what Lavinia would perhaps have refused, Spirite accords you, not as a pleasure of the flesh, but as a sign of pure love and eternal union;" and she allowed her filmy hand to rest for a few seconds beneath Guy's imaginary kiss.

Then she turned again to the piano, which poured forth a melody of incomparable power and sweetness, in which Guy recognized one of his poems—the one he liked the best—transposed from the language of verse to the language of music. It was a composition in which, disdainful of vulgar joys, he breathed forth a despairing longing for those higher spheres where the desire of the poet will at last be satisfied. With marvelous intuition, Spirite interpreted what lay beneath the mere words, what remains unuttered in even the most beautiful phrases of human speech, the mysterious, hidden depths, the secret aspiration which one scarcely acknowledges even to himself, the unspeakable and the inexpressible, the *desideratum* of the thought which one despairs of attaining, and all the grace, buoyancy, and delicacy of touch which escape the arid limitations of words. With an uplifting of the soul, she opened the paradise of realized and accomplished hopes. She stood erect upon the luminous threshold, in a brilliancy that would make suns pale, divinely beautiful and yet humanly tender, opening her arms to the soul that was longing for the ideal, the final reward, the starry crown and the cup of love—Beatrice revealed only beyond the tomb. In melody, expressive of the purest devotion, she intimated, with divine reticence and celestial modesty, that she herself, in the leisure of eternity and the glory of the infinite, would fulfill all these unsatisfied desires. She promised to genius happiness and love, but such as the imagination of man, even when prompted by a spirit, could not conceive.

During the latter part of the music she had risen; her hands no longer made the motions of striking the keys, and the melodies escaped from the piano in visible, bright-hued vibrations, spreading through the atmosphere of the room in luminous pulsations, like those of the aurora borealis. Lavinia was gone and Spirite had reappeared, but taller, more majestic than before, and surrounded by a blaze of light; long wings were outspread from her shoulders; although it was evident that she wished to remain, she had already quitted the floor of the chamber; a higher power commanded her presence, and Malivert found himself alone in a state of exaltation easy to understand.

But little by little he recovered his calmness, and a delicious languor succeeded the feverish excitement. He felt that satisfaction, which it is said that poets and philosophers so rarely experience, of having his genius thoroughly understood in all its depth and delicacy. What a startling and radiant interpretation Spirite had given to his verses, the meaning and power of which he, the author, had never so well understood! How identified her soul had become with his! How perfectly her mind had penetrated his thoughts!

The next day he longed to work; his enthusiasm, so long extinguished, blazed up again, and ideas pressed tumultuously about his brain. Limitless horizons, endless perspectives opened before his eyes. A world of new sentiments fermented in his breast, and to express them he demanded of language more than she could give. The old forms, the old molds broke, and sometimes the sentence which was being melted into shape burst forth and overflowed its boundaries, but in superb splashes, like rays of broken stars. Never had he risen to such heights, and the greatest of poets would willingly have signed what he wrote that day.

Suddenly, just as he had finished one strophe and was considering the next, with his eyes wandering absently about the study, he saw Spirite, who, half reclining on the divan, with her back supported by a cushion, her chin resting in one hand, and the tapering fingers of the other playing with the golden meshes of her hair, was regarding him with loving contemplation. She had apparently been there for a long time, but she had not cared to reveal her presence for fear of disturbing his work. As Malivert rose from his chair to approach her, she made him a sign not to disturb himself, and, in a voice sweeter than any music, she repeated, strophe for strophe, verse for verse, the poem at which Guy was working. With mysterious sympathy she perceived the thoughts of her lover, followed them in their flight, and even surpassed them; for not only was she gifted with intuition, but she also possessed foresight, and she recited complete the unfinished stanza which he was racking his brains to find a fitting end for.

The poem, of course, was addressed to her. What other subject could Malivert treat of? Carried along by his love for Spirite, he scarcely remembered the earth, and soared into the empyrean as far and as high as wings attached to human shoulders can attain.

"It is beautiful," said Spirite, whose voice Malivert heard resound in his breast, for it did not reach his ear like ordinary sounds. "It is beautiful even to a spirit; genius is undoubtedly divine; it invents the ideal, it catches glimpses of the higher beauty and the eternal light. To what heights can it not reach when it has for wings faith and love! But descend; return to the regions where the air can be breathed by mortal lungs. All your nerves are quivering like the cords of a lyre, and your brow is moist with excitement. Strange, feverish lights gleam in your eyes. Beware of madness, to which the ecstacy of genius is akin. Calm yourself, and if you love me, live once more human life—I wish it!"

So, in obedience to her request, Malivert went out into society, and although men no longer appeared to him anything but distant shadows, phantoms with whom he had nothing in common, he tried to mingle with them; he assumed an interest in the gossip and scandals of the day, and smiled at the description of the extraordinary costume worn by Mademoiselle A—— at the last masked ball; he even accepted an invitation to play whist with the old Duchess de C——; it was wholly immaterial to him what he did.

But, in spite of his efforts to attach himself to the world, an imperious influence drew him away from the terrestrial sphere. He tried to walk and he felt himself uplifted. An irresistible longing was consuming him. The appearances of Spirite no longer satisfied him, and his soul sped after her when she disappeared. as if trying to detach itself from his body. A love excited by the impossible, and in which still burned something of the earthly flame, devoured him and clung to his flesh, as did the poisoned shirt of Nessus to the skin of Hercules. His relations with the spiritual world had been too short for him to have entirely divested himself of the desires of the flesh.

He could not seize in his arms the airy phantom of Spirite, but this phantom represented the image of Lavinia with an illusion of beauty sufficient to delude love and to make him forget that the exquisite face, with its eyes full of tenderness and its mouth wreathed in a loving smile, was, after all, only a shade and a reflection.

Guy saw before him, at every hour of the day and night, his *alma adorata,* sometimes as a pure ideal in the splendor of Spirite, and sometimes under the more humanly feminine appearance of Lavinia. Now, she floated above his head in the transplendent guise of an angel; and again, as a sweetheart making him a visit, she appeared seated in the big arm-chair, reclining on the divan or leaning against the table; she seemed to examine the papers scattered over the desk, to inhale the perfume of the flowers in the jardinières, to open the books, to play with the rings placed in the onyx cup upon the mantel-piece, and in fact to enact all those tender follies indulged in by a young girl who chances to find herself in the room of her fiancé.

Spirite was pleased to show herself in Guy's eyes as Lavinia would have appeared on a like occasion, if fate had been favorable to her love; she reconstructed, after death, her chaste, girlish romance, chapter by chapter. With a little colored vapor she reproduced her toilettes of other days, placed in her hair the same flower or ribbon. Her phantom assumed the graceful attitudes and poses which had been natural to her human body. She wished, with a coquetry which proved that the woman had not wholly disappeared in the angel, that Malivert should love her not only with a posthumous love given to the spirit, but as he might have loved her during life, when she sought so fruitlessly to meet him at theatres, balls, and receptions.

If his lips had not brushed the empty air, when, transported with longing, mad with love, intoxicated with passion, he forgot himself in some fruitless caress, Guy might have believed that he had really married Lavinia d'Aufideni, the vision at times became so clear, glowing, and life-like. In the perfect sympathy which existed between them, he heard internally, but as if in a real interview, the voice of Lavinia, with its fresh, youthful, silvery accents, responding to his ardent outbursts with a pure and modest tenderness.

The torments of Tantalus were his; the cup full of cool water, held by a loving hand, approached his feverish lips, but he could not even brush the rim of it; the perfumed grapes, amber and ruby tinted, hung low above his head, but fled each time his eager grasp.

The short intervals during which Spirite left him, summoned doubtless by some absolute order from that place where "all things are possible," had become unbearable to him, and when she disappeared, he would gladly have dashed his head against the wall which closed upon her.

One evening the thought came to him: "Since Spirite can not take on the vestments of the flesh nor mingle in my life otherwise than as a vision, why should I not 'shuffle off this mortal coil,' rid myself of this thick, heavy form which prevents me rising with the soul I adore to the sphere where spirits hover?"

The idea seemed to him a wise one. He rose, and selected from among an arrangement of savage weapons hung against the wall—clubs, tomahawks, assegais, cutlasses—an arrow tipped with parrot feathers and furnished with a sharp point made of fish-bone. This arrow had been dipped in *curare,* that terrible poison of which the American Indians alone know the secret, and for which there is no antidote.

He directed the point toward the hand he was about to prick, when suddenly before him appeared Spirite, alarmed, distracted, suppliant, and, with a gesture of frantic love, threw her shadowy arms about his neck, straining him to her spirit heart, and covering his face with impalpable kisses. The woman had forgotten that she was no longer but a phantom.

"Unhappy man," she cried, "do not do that; do not kill yourself to join me! Your death thus brought about would separate us beyond all hope, and open between us an abyss which millions of years would not suffice to bridge. Recover your senses and live your life; the longest of lives is in point of time no more than the fall of a grain of sand; to enable you to bear the period of waiting, think of eternity, where we will be permitted to love each other forever; and forgive me for having been a coquette. The woman wished to be loved as well as the spirit; Lavinia was jealous of Spirite, and my folly has well-nigh lost you to me forever." Then, as she breathed the last words, she reassumed her form of an angel and extended her hands above the head of Malivert, who felt descend upon him a celestial peace and happiness.

Chapter XIV

BLUISH VAPOR

Madame d'Ymbercourt was astonished at the slight effect which her flirtation with Monsieur d'Aversac had produced upon Guy de Malivert; her lack of success overturned all her ideas of feminine strategy. It had been her belief that nothing reanimated love like a touch of jealousy; but she forgot that, for the truth of the maxim, the existence of love itself was a *sine qua non.* Still, when a young man had been in the habit of attending her receptions regularly enough for the space of three years, brought her occasionally a bouquet on opera nights, and stood in the back of her box without going to sleep, she naturally supposed that he must be somewhat fascinated by her charms. Was she not young, handsome, fashionable, rich? Did she not play the piano like a prize-scholar of the Conservatoire? Did she not pour out tea with the perfect manners of Lady Penelope herself? Did she not write her notes in an English hand—long, sloping, angular, entirely aristocratic? What exception could be taken to her carriages, which came from Binder's, or her horses, bought from Crémieux, with his guarantee? Did not her footmen make a fine appearance, and were they not evidently the servants of a well-appointed household? Did not her dinners merit the approbation of epicures? All this being so, she could not understand what more a young man could desire in a wife. But still the lady of the sleigh she had seen in the Bois de Boulogne preoccupied her mind, and she made the tour of the lake several times in the hope of meeting her, and seeing if Malivert were with her. The lady did not reappear, however, and Madame d'Ymbercourt's jealousy had nothing substantial to feed upon; no one seemed to know, or even to have noticed, the mysterious Russian. Was Guy in love with her, or had he simply yielded to an impulse of curiosity when he started Grymalkin in pursuit of her? This was the riddle which Madame d'Ymbercourt could not unravel. So she returned to the idea that she had frightened Guy away, by giving him to understand that he was compromising her; she intended that her words should force him to a formal declaration, and she now regretted that she had ever spoken them; for Guy, obeying her too literally, and, moreover, engrossed with Spirite, had entirely ceased his calls. His absolute compliance piqued the Countess, who would have preferred less submission. Although her suspicions were not very keenly aroused by the fleeting vision of the Bois de Boulogne, she felt that this excessive care of her reputation concealed some love affair. There was no apparent change, however, in Guy's life; and Jack, secretly questioned by Madame d'Ymbercourt's maid, declared that fo a very long time he had not heard the slightest frou-frou of silk upon his master's private staircase; that Monsieur de Malivert rarely went out, saw scarcely anyone except the Baron de Féroë, lived like an anchorite, and passed a large part of his nights in writing.

D'Aversac increased his attentions, and Madame d'Ymbercourt accepted them with the tacit gratitude which a woman feels who has been somewhat slighted, and who needs to be assured of her charms by new admirers. She did not love Monsieur d'Aversac, but she was grateful to him for valuing so highly what Guy seemed to disdain; so, one evening, at a representation of La Traviata, it was noticed that Malivert's place was occupied by d'Aversac, carefully dressed, a camellia in his button-hole, perfumed and curled, and beaming with fatuous happiness. For a long time he had cherished the ambition to please Madame d'Ymbercourt, but the marked preference accorded to Guy de Malivert had relegated him to the third or fourth ranks of those silent adorers who circulate more or less about a pretty woman, awaiting an opportunity, caused by a rupture or a bit of spite.

He was full of little attentions, held her lorgnette or her programme, smiled at her least word, leaned mysteriously forward to answer, and when she gently patted her gloved hands in approval of some brilliant passage of the diva he applauded rapturously, raising his hands as high as his head; in short, he displayed himself to the public as her attendant swain.

It was beginning to be whispered

in the boxes, "Is not Madame d'Ymbercourt to marry Malivert, after all?" And there was a general movement of curiosity when, after the first act, Guy appeared at the entrance of the orchestra, and, after glancing about the auditorium, allowed his eyes to rest absently upon the box of the Countess. D'Aversac himself, as he perceived this, experienced a slight feeling of uneasiness; but the strongest lorgnettes could not discover the faintest sign of annoyance upon Malivert's face. He turned neither red nor pale; there was no contradiction of the brows; no muscle of his face moved; there was nothing of that furious aspect assumed by lovers at the sight of the adored one attended by another; he was perfectly calm and serene. The expression of his face was that of one possessed of a secret happiness, and about his lips hovered, as the poet says:

Le sourire mystérieux
Des voluptés intérieurs.

"If Guy were beloved by a fairy or a princess, he could not have a more triumphant air," said an old habitué of the balcony, a Don Juan emeritus. "If Madame d'Ymbercourt still holds to it, she will wear mourning for her projected plan of matrimony, for she will never be called Madame de Malivert."

During the entr'acte Guy made a short visit to the Countess' box, to take leave of the lady, as he was about to be absent for some months in Greece. His courteous treatment of d'Aversac was natural, neither constrained nor exaggerated; he had none of that coldly ceremonious bearing of people who are vexed, and he pressed with the utmost calmness the hand of Madame d'Ymbercourt, whose countenance betrayed her agitation, although she made heroic efforts to appear indifferent. The color which had flushed her cheeks when Guy left his seat in the orchestra to come to the box, had given place to a pallor which was not due to rice-powder. She had hoped that he would exhibit some anger, a movement of passion, a mark of jealousy, perhaps even that he might provoke a quarrel; but his calmness, which was only too evidently unassumed, overthrew her hopes and took her completely by surprise. She had believed that Malivert was in love with her, and she saw now that she was mistaken. Such a discovery was a blow to both her pride and her heart. Guy had inspired her with a deeper affection than she herself had been aware of. The comedy she was playing, now that she saw it was of no avail, bored and fatigued her. After Malivert's departure, she leaned her elbow upon the edge of the box, returning only monosyllables to the gallant speeches addressed to her by d'Aversac, and disconcerting that gentleman by her silence and coldness. He could not understand how it was, but winter seemed to have taken the place of spring. A sudden frost had withered the roses. "Have I said or done anything stupid?" thought the poor fellow, who only a few minutes before had received such gracious treatment; "or is it possible that I have been made game of? Guy, just now, had an affected ease of manner, and the Countess exhibited some emotion. Does she still love Malivert?" In spite of all, however, as d'Aversac knew that there were several glasses leveled at him, he continued to play his part, leaning toward the Countess and murmuring in her ear, with an air of mysterious intimacy, commonplaces which all the world might have heard.

The old habitué, who was intensely amused by the little drama transpiring before him, watched out of the corner of his eye each movement of the actors concerned in it. "D'Aversac's good nature is but ill assumed; he is not strong enough for his part. However, he is nothing but a donkey, and donkeys sometimes have good luck with women. Stupidity is closely allied to folly, and Laridon succeeds Cæsar when Cæsar is weary of his empire; but who can be Guy's new flame?" Such were the reflections of this veteran of Cythera, who was as strong in theory as he had once been in practice, and he followed the direction of Malivert's eyes to see if they were fixed upon any of the beautiful women who glittered in the boxes like jewels in their case. "Can it be that vaporish blonde in the pale-green gown, with garlands of silver leaves and opal ornaments, who looks as if gilded with a moonbeam, like an elf or a nixy, and who contemplates the chandelier with a sentimental air, as if it were the planet of the night? Or can it be that brunette with hair darker than midnight, eyes like black diamonds, a scarlet mouth and a classic profile, whose blood runs swiftly beneath her warm pallor, who is so passionate beneath her statuesque calmness, and who might be taken for the daughter of the Venus of Milo if that divine masterpiece deigned to have children? No, it is neither—neither the moon nor the sun. That Russian princess below there, in the first tier, with her mad luxury, her exotic beauty, and her extravagant grace, might have some chance. Guy is rather fond of anything odd, and he has traveled in such extraordinary places that his tastes are somewhat barbarian. No, she is not the one. He has just looked at her with a glance as cold as if he were examining a casket of malachite. Why not that Parisian, in the proscenium-box, dressed in perfect taste, delicate, pretty, spirituelle, and whose every movement raises a foam of lace and seems to be in unison with the music of a flute, as if she were a dancing figure on a panel from Herculaneum? Balzac would have devoted thirty pages to the description of such a woman, and his genius would have been well employed; she is well worth the trouble. But Guy is not civilized enough to appreciate that peculiar charm which had a greater fascination than mere outward beauty for the author of the *Comédie Humaine*. Well, I must abandon for this evening the task of penetrating this mystery," concluded the old beau, enclosing in its case a lorgnette which resembled a piece of artillery. "The lady of Malivert's fancy is most assuredly not here."

After the opera, d'Aversac, buttoned to the chin in his overcoat, and with the nonchalant air of a man of fashion, stood in the lobby beside Madame d'Ymbercourt, who had thrown over her evening dress an opera cloak of satin bordered with swansdown, the hood of which, falling back upon her shoulders, left her head uncovered. The Countess was pale, and this eveing really beautiful. The pain and distress she was suffering lent to her face, which was ordinarily coldly regular, an expression and life which had hitherto been lacking. She seemed to have completely forgotten her escort, who stood two feet from her, seeking to dissimulate his chagrin by a continual chatter.

"What has happened to Madame d'Ymbercourt this evening?" said one of the young men who were standing under the vestibule to review, as they passed, the feminine ranks of beauty. "She never looked so handsome as she does tonight. D'Aversac is a lucky fellow." "Not so lucky as you think," rejoined a young man with a fine, delicate face, like a portrait by Van Dyck stepped down from its frame. "He is not the one who has given that animated expression to the Countess' face, which is usually as characterless as a waxen mask of one of Canova's Venuses. The spark came from another direction. D'Aversac is not the Prometheus of this Pandora. Wood possesses no power to infuse life into marble."

"All the same," observed another, "Malivert shows poor taste to desert the Countess just now. She deserves some one superior to d'Aversac for an avenger. I don't believe Guy can do better, and he will probably repent his disdain."

"He will be wrong if he does," said the portrait by Van Dyck, "and for this reason. Madame d'Ymbercourt is handsomer than usual tonight, because her feelings have been aroused. Now, if Malivert did not leave her, she would feel no emotion, and her classically regular features would preserve their uninteresting expression; the metamorphosis you have noticed would not take place. So, Malivert is right to go to Greece, as he announced yesterday at the club. *Dixi.*"

The footman announcing Madame d'Ymbercourt's carriage put an end to the conversation, and more than one young man committed the sin of envy as he saw d'Aversac enter the coupé with the Countess. The door was slammed to, the footman sprung up behind in a twinkling, and the carriage whirled away. D'Aversac, half covered by the voluminous satin train, and inhaling the delicate perfume the Countess affected, sought to profit by the short interview, and say to her a few words a little more tender than usual. It was necessary to find upon the instant something which should clearly, and yet delicately, show his feelings, for it is not a long distance from the Place Ventadour to the Rue de la Chaussée-d'Antin; but improvisation was not the strong point of Guy's rival. Madame d'Ymbercourt, it must be confessed, did not give him much encouragement; she remained perfectly silent, and, leaning back in the dark corner of the carriage, she nervously twisted between her fingers her lace handkerchief.

While d'Aversac was attempting to bring to a close his laboriously tender speech, Madame d'Ymbercourt, who had been absorbed by her own thoughts, and had not heard a word he was saying, suddenly seized his arm and said, abruptly:

"Do you know what woman it is to whom Monsieur de Malivert is devoted?"

This singular and unexpected question was a terrible shock to d'Aversac.

It was of doubtful propriety, and proved that the Countess had not given him, d'Aversac, a single thought. The card-house of his hopes crumbled at this breath of passion.

"I do not know her," he stammered; "and if I did, discretion, delicacy, would prevent me—every gentleman, in such a case, knows that it is his duty to——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Countess, in cutting tones, "men always shield one another, even when they are rivals. I shall never know." Then, after a short silence, during which she recovered something of her self-possession, she continued: "Pardon me, my dear Monsieur d'Aversac, my nerves are horribly unstrung this evening, and I know that I am saying foolish things; do not be angry with me, and come to see me tomorrow, when I shall be calmer. But we have reached home," extending her hand; "tell the coachman where to take you." And she rapidly descended from the coupé and ran up the steps, ignoring d'Aversac's proffered arm.

Evidently, to accompany a beautiful woman in a carriage from the Italiens to the Chaussée-d'Antin is not always so agreeable as ingenuous young men imagine it to be. D'Aversac, sheepishly enough, ordered the coachman to drive him to the club, where his own carriage awaited him. He played baccarat, and lost a hundred louis, which did not tend to restore his good humor. As he drove home, he thought: "How the deuce does that Malivert manage to make himself so popular with women?"

Meanwhile, Madame d'Ymbercourt had dismissed her maid, and, wrapped in a dressing-gown of white cashmere, sat with her elbows resting on her writing-desk, and her hands buried in the masses of her hair. She remained in this position for some time, with her eyes fixed upon the writing materials spread out before her. She meant to write to Guy, but it was a difficult letter to compose. The thoughts which surged in her brain escaped her when she tried to embody them in sentences. She scribbled five or six rough drafts, verbose, incoherent, and ineligible, in spite of her beautiful English hand, without attaining to anything that satisfied her. One said too much, and another too little. None of them reflected the sentiments of her heart, and all of them were torn up and cast into the fire. Finally, she accepted the following:

"Do not be angry, my dear Guy, at actions which were pure coquetry, I assure you, for they had no other object than to render you a little jealous, and so bring you to my side. You know well that I love you, although I am afraid you do not care much for me. Your cold, calm manner has frozen my heart. Forget what I said to you. It was done through the advice of a mischief-making friend. Are you really going to Greece? Is it worth while now to fly from me—me, who have no thought than to please you? Do not go; your absence would make me too unhappy."

She signed this note "Cécile d'Ymbercourt," sealed it with her crest, and thought of sending it on the spot; but as she rose to summon a domestic, the clock struck two; it was too late to send a man to the end of the Fauborg Saint-Germain, where Guy lived.

"Ah! well," she thought, "I will send it early in the morning, so that Guy will receive it as soon as he is up—that is, if he has not already gone away."

She retired, weary and worn out; but for some time it was in vain for her to court repose. She thought of the lady of the sleigh, and said to herself that Guy loved her, and jealousy implanted its sharp needles in her heart. At last she fell asleep, but her rest was troubled, full of thoughts more painful than those of her waking moments. A small lamp, suspended from the ceiling and shaded by a globe of opaque, blue glass, spread through the chamber a faint, azure light, not unlike that of the moon; it shone softly and mysteriously upon the face of the Countess, whose unloosened hair lay in thick, black masses upon the whiteness of the pillow. One arm hung down outside the bed.

Suddenly, close to the couch, appeared, becoming gradually more and more condensed, a light, transparent, bluish vapor, like the smoke from a perfume censer; this vapor resolved itself into a more definite shape, and soon became a young girl of celestial beauty, whose golden hair formed a luminous aureole about her head. Spirite, for it was she, regarded the sleeping woman with that look of melancholy pity which angels must wear in the presence of human suffering, and leaning over her like the shadow of a dream, she let fall upon her forehead two or three drops of a dark liquid from a little vase shaped like the lachrymary urns found in ancient tombs, murmuring as she did so, "Since thou art no longer dangerous to the one I love, and thou canst not now part his soul from mine, I pity thee, for thou sufferest on his account, and I bring thee the divine nepenthe. Forget and be happy, oh thou who wast the cause of my death!"

The vision disappeared. The features of the beautiful sleeper became composed, as if to a painful nightmare had succeeded a pleasant dream; a slight smile played about her lips; with an unconscious movement she drew into bed her lovely white arm, which had now the coldness as well as the whiteness of marble, and drew over it the light eider-down quilt. Her sleep, calm and refreshing, lasted until morning, and when she awoke, the first thing she perceived was her letter lying upon a table by the bedside.

"Shall I send it?" asked Aglaé, who had entered the chamber to open the blinds, and saw that the eyes of her mistress were directed to the missive.

"Oh, no!" exclaimed Madame d'Ymbercourt, quickly; "throw it in the fire." Then she added, to herself: "How could I have written such a letter? I was mad!"

Chapter XV

EVEN AT SEA

The steamer which plies between Marseilles and Athens had reached Cape Malea, the farthest point of the mulberry-leaf which forms the lower part of Greece, and which has given it its modern name. Clouds, fogs, and frosts were left far behind. Darkness had given place to light; cold to warmth. To the gray tints of the sky of the Occident had succeeded the azure of that of the Orient, and the deep, blue sea undulated in gentle ripples, stirred by a favorable breeze, which the steamer took advantage of, spreading its sails, so blackened by smoke that they were like those sombre-colored ones which Theseus inadvertently hoisted on his return from the Isle of Crete, after he had slain the minotaur. February was near its end, and already the approach of spring, which is so slow in France, was making itself felt in this happy climate so loved by the sun. The air was so mild that the greater part of the passengers, now cured of their seasickness, remained on deck, watching the shores, which loomed up through the blue, evening mists. Above the vaporous shadows emerged a mountain, still visible, and retaining upon its snow-covered summit the last rays of the departing day. The peak was Taygetos, which furnished an opportunity to those travelers who had received a collegiate education, and knew a few odds and ends of Latin, to recite, with self-satisfied pedantry, Virgil's familiar verses. It is a rare thing for a Frenchman to quote, pertinently, a Latin verse, and when he does, he is very near perfect happiness. To quote a Greek verse is a felicity reserved for Germans and Englishmen, who are graduates of Jena or Oxford.

Seated upon the light benches and folding chairs which encumbered the stern of the vessel were young English girls, dressed in long ulsters with immense buttons, and turban hats wrapped about with blue veils. Their traveling-bags were slung across their shoulders, confined by a leather strap; and they contemplated the shores, now dim in the evening shadows, through field-glasses strong enough to distinguish the satellites of Jupiter. Some of the more hardy among them, who had become accustomed to the motion of the vessel, walked the deck with that practiced, regular step which professors of pedestrianism, old military sergeants, teach the young ladies across the Channel. Others were chatting with gentlemen, who were arrayed in a most correct and irreproachable fashion in all respects. There were also some Frenchmen, pupils of the School of Athens—painters and architects—who had won the Prix de Rome, and were on their way to drink deep draughts from the springs of the True and the Beautiful. These latter, with all the joyousness of youth, which has hope in the future and a little silver in the pocket, were jesting, laughing uproariously, smoking cigars, and indulging in warm discussions on esthetic subjects. The reputations of the great masters, ancient and modern, were discussed, questioned, torn into shreds; everything was wonderful or ridiculous, sublime or stupid; for young people are apt to rush to extremes, and they know no middle course, no moderate phrases. They are not ones to wed King *Modus* to Queen *Ratio;* this marriage of convenience is never made until later in life.

In the midst of this group, draped in his mantle like a philosopher of the Porticus, was a young man who was neither painter, sculptor, nor architect, and yet whom the traveling artists selected as a judge whenever their discussions ended in obstinacy on both sides. This young man was Guy de Malivert. His remarks were so keen and well-poised that they showed a veritable connoisseur, an art critic worthy of the name, and the supercilious young men who looked down upon all who had handled neither brush, chisel, nor drawing-pen, listened to his opinions with a certain deference, and sometimes even went so far as to adopt them.

The conversation grew wearisome at last, as does everything, even a discussion of the real and the ideal, and the young orators, whose throats were rather dry, descended to the cabin to wet their larynxes with grog or some other hot and grateful drink. Malivert was left alone on the deck. The twilight was over, and the shades of night had fallen. In the azure darkness of the heavens, the stars burned with a brilliancy and splendor that can only be realized if one has seen the skies of Greece. Their lustre was reflected upon the water in long, wavy lines, like those made by lights upon the shore; the foam churned by the vessel's wheels spouted up in millions of diamonds, which flashed an instant and then melted away in streaks of steely phosphorescence. The black hull of the steamer seemed to swim in a bath of light. It was a spectacle which would have excited the admiration of the most obtuse Philistine, and Malivert, who was not a Philistine, thoroughly enjoyed it. He never thought of such a thing as following the others to the cabin, where there is always a sickening closeness, especially noticeable to one coming in from the fresh air; but he continued to pace the deck from stern to bow, threading his way amidst the Levantines who were lying upon carpets of light mattresses spread amidst the mass of chains and cordage, and the unexpected sight of whom occasionally startled some woman who had come on deck to breathe the fresh night air.

Guy, as we see, was keeping the promise he had made not to compromise Madame d'Ymbercourt. He leaned against the bulwark and abandoned himself to the sweetest of reveries. Since Spirite's love had disengaged his mind from earthly interests, the voyage to Greece no longer inspired him with the same enthusiasm as formerly. The journey he longed to take was a far different one, but he no longer thought of hurrying his departure for that world where his heart already was. He knew now the consequences of suicide, and he possessed his soul in patience until the hour should come for him to take wing with the angel whose presence was ever about him. Assured of his future happiness, he abandoned himself to the enjoyment of the present, and reveled like a poet in the superb beauty of the night. Like Lord Byron, he loved the sea. Its eternal unrest and its murmuring, which is never silent, even in its calmest hours; its sudden revolts and insensate fury against the immovable, had always appealed to his imagination, which saw in this profitless turbulence a covert analogy with the futility of human effort. What especially charmed him in the sea, however, were the complete isolation, the circle of the horizon always the same and yet always changing, the solemn monotony, and the absence of all sign of civilization. The same swell of the waters which raised the steamer on its undulating waves had once bathed, although no trace was left behind, the vessels with "hollow flanks," of which Homer speaks. The water had precisely the same tint that colored it when ploughed by the Grecian fleet. Unlike the land, the sea, in its pride, emerges unscarred from the passage of man. It is vast, deep, and unconfined, like the infinite. And Malivert had never felt freer, more light-hearted, more in possession of all his faculties, than when, erect upon the prow of the ship, now rising, now sinking, he advanced into the unknown. Wet with the foam thrown up on the deck, his hair impregnated with the salty vapor, it seemed to him that he was flying over the waves, and as a horseman becomes indentified with the swiftness of his steed, so he gave himself all credit for the speed of the vessel, and his thoughts flew forward across the waters.

Like a feather or a flake of snow, Spirite had descended noiselessly to Malivert's side, and her hand rested upon the young man's shoulder. Although she would have been invisible to any bystander, we may be permitted to imagine the exquisite group formed by Malivert and his aerial friend. The moon had risen round and clear, paling the stars, and the night had become a sort of azure day, the light that of a blue grotto, and a tone magical in its effect. The rays fell upon the prow of the ship where stood our Cupid and Psyche, radiant amidst the diamond-pointed scintillation of the foam, like young gods at the prow of an ancient bireme. Over the sea, in a continual luminous tremor, was spread out a broad track spangled with silver, the reflection of the queen of the night emerging from the horizon and mounting slowly into the heavens. Occasionally, the black back of a dolphin—a descendant, perhaps, of the one which bore Arion—would loom up across the sparkling pathway, and vanish again in the shadows beyond; or, far in the distance, like a swaying red point, would be revealed the head-light of some bark. Now and then the shores of an island, cut in violet against the sky, would appear and glide slowly past, to be lost again in the distance.

"It is a marvelous spectacle," said Spirite; "one of the most beautiful, if not the most beautiful, that it is permitted to a human eye to contemplate; but what is it in comparison with the wonderful scenes of the world I have left to descend to you, and where we shall soon fly side by side, 'like doves impelled by the same desire?' This sea, which seems to you so grand, is only a drop in the cup of the infinite; and that pale planet which lights it is lost in the immensity of space, an imperceptible globule of silver, the smallest grain of the siderial sands. Oh! how, standing by your side, I would have admired this sight, when I still inhabited the earth and was called Lavinia! But do not think I remain insensible to it now; I can understand its beauty through your emotion."

"How impatient you make me for the other life, Spirite," responded Malivert, "and with what ardor do I long for those worlds of splendors, dazzling beyond all expression or thought, where we will live together, and nothing shall ever separate us more."

"You will see them; you will know all their magnificence, all the delights they can give, if you love me, if you are faithful to me, if your thoughts never turn toward anything base, if, as to the bottom of a still, deep pool of water, you let fall into your lowest depths all human grossness and impurity. On these conditions we shall be allowed, eternally united to one another, to taste the calm delights of divine love, that love which knows no fracture, no weakness, no satiety, and whose ardor would melt suns like grains of myrrh in a flame. To deserve supreme felicity, think of Spirite, who is in Heaven, and not too much of Lavinia, who sleeps beneath her white wreath of sculptured roses."

"Do I not love you madly!" exclaimed Malivert, "with all the purity and all the ardor of which a soul still bound to this earth can be capable?"

"My friend," answered Spirite, "continue as you are; I am content with you."

And as she spoke these words, her starry, sapphire eyes were full of loving promises, and a smile, passionately chaste, parted her exquisite lips.

The interview between the living and the spirit was prolonged until the first rays of the dawn had begun to mingle their rose-colored tints with the violet hues of the moon, whose disk was gradually becoming effaced. Soon a segment of the sun appeared above the bar of dusky blue which the sea formed on the horizon, and the day broke with a sublime display of pyrotechnics. Spirite, angel of light, had nothing to fear from the sun, and she remained a few minutes longer upon the prow, dazzlingly beautiful in the roseate light, with the flaming rays of the morning playing like golden butterflies upon her hair, ruffled by the breeze of the Archipelago. Although she preferred to appear in the night-time, it was because the movement of ordinary human life being then suspended, Guy was freer, less observed, and ran no risk of appearing crazy by actions which, from an external point of view, would seem peculiar.

When she saw that Malivert was white and shivering in the chill of the morning, she said to him in a tone of gentle chiding: "Do not struggle against nature, poor creature of clay; it is cold, and the decks and cordage are soaked with the salt spray. Return to the cabin and sleep." Then she added, with a grace wholly feminine: "Sleep does not separate us. I shall be with you in your dreams, and will bear you away to that place where you can not go while you are awake."

And, indeed, Guy's sleep was full of rose-colored, radiant, supernatural dreams, in which, side by side with Spirite, he floated through Paradise and Elysium, a commingling of ideal architecture and foliage and brilliant color of which no words of our poor tongue, so limited, imperfect, and obscure, could give the most distant idea.

It is useless to describe the rest of Guy's voyage in detail; that would not come within the province of this story, and, besides, Guy, occupied with his love and overwhelmed with an unquenchable longing, paid much less attention than formerly to material things; he saw in nature now only a vague, misty, beautiful background for the one idea which consumed him. The world was for him only the landscape of the picture in which Spirite was the single figure, and he considered the most beautiful bits of scenery but little worthy of serving in that capacity.

Still, the next morning, at daybreak, he could not repress an exclamation of delighted surprise when, as the steamer entered the bay of Piræus, he discovered the marvelous picture displayed in the sunshine—the amethyst-tinted peaks of Parnes and Hymettus on either side, and in the background, Lykabettos and the broken outlines of Pentelicus. In the foreground, like a tripod of gold upon an altar of marble, rose, above the Acropolis, the Parthenon illumined by the crimson rays of the rising sun; the bluish hues of the distant landscape appeared through the interstices of the crumbling columns, and rendered still more ethereal and ideal the noble proportions of the temple. Malivert felt that emotion which an appreciation of the beautiful always causes, and he understood much that had hitherto seemed obscure to him. All the art of the Greeks was revealed in that fleeting vision—the perfect proportion of all the parts, the absolute purity of the lines, and the matchless tone of the coloring, a blending of white, azure and sunlight.

As soon as he had disembarked, without troubling himself about his luggage, which he left Jack to look after, he leaped into one of those cabs which, to the shame of modern civilization, take the place of the ancient chariots, and carry travelers from Piræus to Athens, over a road white with dust, and bordered here and there with a few dingy olive-trees. The vehicle which Malivert had taken was rickety, and rattled in all its joints; it was dragged on the gallop by two little dappled gray horses, with their manes cut short and standing up like a hairbrush; they might have been the skeletons, or rather the clay models, of the horses which prance in marble upon the platform of the Parthenon; their ancestors had doubtless posed for Phidias. They were driven, with wild whirls of the whip, by a youth clothed in a costume which might have been worn by Palicarus, who, perhaps the conductor of a more brilliant equipage, once won the prize for chariot-racing in the Olympian games.

Leaving the other travelers to invade the Hôtel d'Angleterre, Guy proceeded to the foot of the sacred hill, where human genius, in all its flower of youth, poetry, and love, collected together its finest masterpieces, as if to challenge the admiration of the gods. He mounted the old Street of the Tripods, now encumbered with ugly hovels, treading with a respectful step upon the dust formed by the crumbling away of marvels, and finally came out upon the steps of the Propylæa, which have been raised a little to allow of the burial of the dead beneath; he crossed this strange cemetery among a confused mass of marble slabs, with the little temple of "The Wingless Victory" on one side, and on the other the pedestal of the equestrian statue of Cimon and the Pinacothecus, where are preserved the works of Zeuxis, Apelles, Timanthus, and Protogenes.

He passed through the Propylæa of Mnesicles, a masterpiece worthy to serve as a gateway to the divine achievement of Ictinus and Phidias, with a feeling of awed admiration; he was almost ashamed—he, a barbarian of the Occident—to walk shod with leather upon this sacred soil.

A few steps, however, brought him to the Parthenon—the Temple of the Virgin—the sanctuary of Pallas-Athene, the purest conception of polytheism. The structure rose into the serene blue of the atmosphere, superbly calm, majestically beautiful. A divine harmony reigned in its lines, which, in a secret rhythm, seemed to sing the hymn of beauty. All the parts of the edifice were directed toward an unknown ideal, converged to a mysterious point, but without effort, without violence, and as if sure of attaining their aim. Above the temple, one could imagine suspended the perfected idea toward which the angles of the pediments, the entablatures, and the columns aspired and tried to reach, taking in their course imperceptible curves, perpendicularly and horizontally. The beautiful Doric columns, leaning a little backward, with their flutings like folds of drapery, conjured up visions of chaste virgins, consumed by a vague longing, an indefinable desire.

A warm, yellow color encompassed the edifice in an atmosphere of gold, and under the kiss of time, the marble had taken a pinkish tint, as if modestly blushing.

Upon the steps of the temple, between the two columns behind which opens the door of the Pronaos, stood Spirite, proudly erect in the brilliancy of the Grecian sunshine, so little favorable to apparitions, and on the very threshold of the Parthenon, so perfect in its luminous beauty. A long, white robe, draped in little folds like the tunics of the canephori, descended from her shoulders to her tiny, bare feet. A wreath of violets—those violets the freshness of which Aristophanes celebrates in one of his comedies—crowned the rippling waves of her golden hair. Thus costumed, Spirite resembled one of the virgins of the Panathenæan Festival descended from its frieze. But in her eyes, blue as the forget-me-not, shone a tender light, which is not to be found in eyes of marble. To all the radiant beauty of the sculptured image, she added the beauty of the soul.

Guy mounted the steps and approached Spirite, who held out her hand to him. Then, in a sudden burst of light, he saw the Parthenon as it was in the days of its splendor. The fallen columns were restored to their former positions; the figures of the friezes, which had been taken away by Lord Elgin, or broken by Venetian bombs, were grouped again in their divinely human attitudes. Through the doorway of the Cella, Malivert saw, replaced upon its pedestal, Phidias' statue of ivory and gold, the celestial, the virgin, the immaculate Pallas-Athene; but upon this miracle he cast only a passing glance, and then his eyes immediately sought those of Spirite. Treated with such disdain, the vision of the past vanished.

"Ah!" murmured Spirite, "art itself is forgotten for love. His soul is becoming more and more detached from earth. Soon, dear one, thy desire shall be fulfilled."

And the heart of the young girl beating still in the breast of the spirit, a happy sigh stirred the white folds of her peplum.

CHAPTER XVI

DEATH AND RADIANCE

A FEW days after his visit to the Parthenon, Malivert determined to make an excursion into the environs of Athens, and inspect the beautiful mountains that were visible from his window. He took a guide and two horses, and left Jack behind at the hotel, because he knew that he would be of no use, and even a source of annoyance. Jack was one of those servants who are more difficult to satisfy than their masters, and who are especially disagreeable upon a journey. He was as fussy as an old maid, and found everything detestable—the rooms, the beds, the food, and the wine; and every moment he would inveigh against the awkwardness of the service, characterizing the entire force of the hotel as savages. Besides this, although he gave Malivert credit for some talent as a writer, he considered him incapable of taking care of himself, and even a trifle crazy, especially of late days, and he therefore determined to watch him closely. A frown from Malivert, however, soon nipped this project in the bud, and the mentor, with a wonderful facility for metamorphosis, returned to the rôle of valet.

Guy deposited a certain number of gold pieces in a leather belt which he wore beneath his garments, placed a brace of pistols in the holsters of his saddle, and rode away, assigning no fixed day for his return, as he wished to be free to take advantage of anything unforeseen that might turn up. He knew that Jack, who was accustomed to his disappearances, would not be alarmed if his return were delayed several days, or even weeks, but would remain at the hotel in perfect serenity of mind as soon as he had taught the cook how to broil a beefsteak in accordance with his ideas—well done on one side and rare on the other.

Guy's intention was, unless something should occur to make him change his mind, to go no further than Mount Parnes, and to be absent no longer than five or six days. But, at the end of a month, neither he nor his guide had returned. There had been no letter received from him at the hotel announcing any alteration in his plans; the money he had taken with him must have been exhausted by this time, and his silence was beginning to be alarming.

"Monsieur does not send for any money," thought Jack one morning, while eating a beefsteak at last cooked to a turn, and which he washed down with a bottle of white wine from the island of Santorini, agreeable enough to the taste, in spite of its slight flavor of rosin. "It is very strange; something must have happened to him. If he had decided to continue his journey, he would have sent me word where to forward him funds. I hope he hasn't fallen over some precipice and broken his neck. What a queer idea it is to go galloping about through dirty, ugly countries, where there is nothing fit to eat, when we might be in Paris, comfortably settled in a pleasant place, out of the reach of mosquitoes and other beastly insects that cover you with blisters! Of course, in the summertime, I can imagine one going to Ville d'Avray, Saint Cloud, or Fontainebleau —no, not Fontainebleau, there are too many painters there—and yet I like Paris better. There is no use in talking about it, the country is fit only for peasants and journeys for commercial travelers. It isn't very pleasant to be cooped up in the hotel of a city where there is nothing but ruins to see. Heavens, how stupid are people like my master, with their love for old stones, as if new, fresh buildings were not a thousand times more agreeable to look at! Monsieur de Malivert certainly shows very little consideration for me. Of course, I am his valet, and it is my duty to serve him; but he has no right to leave me to be bored to death in this wretched place! If any misfortune has happened to my master—for, after all, he is a good master—I shall never be consoled unless I find a better place. I have a good mind to go and hunt for him, if I only knew where to look. But who knows where his fancy has led him to go? How could I find him in those ridiculous places amongst the precipices and swamps that he calls picturesque, and sketches in his note-book. Well, I will give him three days more to return home, and if he has not turned up by that time, I will have him cried through all the streets and posted on all the walls like a lost dog, with the promise of a handsome reward to anyone who shall bring him back."

As a modern, cold-blooded servant, who felt it his duty to jeer at the devoted and faithful domestic of the olden times, honest Jack tried to cover up his real anxiety. As a matter of fact, he was warmly attached to Guy de Malivert, and although he knew that he was down in his master's will for a sum that would assure him a modest competency, he did not desire his death.

The landlord was beginning to exhibit some uneasiness, not on account of Malivert, whose bill was paid, but on account of the two horses he had furnished for the expedition. As he lamented the probable fate of these two unequaled animals, who were so gentle, so sure-footed, so tender-mouthed that one could guide them with a silken thread, Jack, losing his patience, said to him with an air of superb disdain: "Well, if your miserable nags have been smashed to pieces, you will be paid for them!" an assurance which at once calmed the fears of brave Diamantopoulos.

Every evening, the wife of the guide, a handsome, robust matron, who might have replaced one of the caryatides taken away from the Pandrosion, came to ask if Stavros, her husband, had returned, either with or without the traveler. After receiving a response, which was invariably in the negative, she sat down on a stone at a short distance from the hotel, undid the false, blonde switch which crowned her black hair, letting the locks stream over her shoulders, placed her nails against her cheeks as if she intended to scratch herself, uttered deep groans, and indulged in all the theatrical demonstrations of grief which were peculiar to the ancients. In reality, she was not deeply affected, for Stavros was a miserable, drunken sort of fellow, who beat her when he was in his cups, and contributed but little money to the household expenses, although he made considerable showing foreigners about; still, she owed it to the proprieties to manifest a sufficient amount of despair. This real or assumed sorrow, expressed in hoarse sobs which recalled the moanings of Hecuba, greatly annoyed and troubled Jack, who, although an unbeliever, was a little superstitious. "I don't like that woman," he said, "who howls like a dog that scents death." And as the three days which he had set as the extreme limit he would wait for Malivert's return had expired, he laid the circumstances of the case before the police. The most thorough search was made in the direction that Malivert and his guide had probably taken. The mountain was beaten on all sides, and in a road which ran through a ravine was found the carcass of a horse, lying on its side, completely despoiled of its harness, and already half eaten by crows. A bullet had broken its shoulder, and the animal must have fallen as soon as struck, and dragged its rider down at the same time. The ground around the place where the dead beast lay seemed to have been trampled in a struggle; but several weeks must have elapsed since the presumed attack, and it was impossible to draw deductions of any value from the foot-prints, which had been half effaced by the rain and wind. In a clump of mastic-trees, near the road, a branch had been broken by the passage of some projectile, and it hung down dead and covered with withered leaves.

The bullet, which was that of a pistol, was found further on in a field. The person who had been attacked appeared to have defended himself. What had been the result of the fight? The only conclusion to be drawn was, that it had been fatal, since neither Malivert nor his guide had reappeared. The horse was identified as one of those that Diamantopoulos had hired out to the young French traveler. But, for lack of more precise data, the examination could proceed no further. Every trace of the aggressors and of the victim, or rather victims—for there must have been two —was lost. The key to the enigma disappeared in the very beginning.

A detailed description of Malivert and Stavros was sent to every place where they might, by any possibility, have gone; but no one had seen them anywhere. Their journey had apparently come to an end at the spot where the horse was found. Perhaps Malivert had been carried by brigands to some inaccessible mountain cave for the purpose of ransom; but a little reflection showed that this supposition could not be correct. Had it been so, the brigands would have sent one of their number in disguise to the city, and found means to place in Jack's hands a letter containing the terms of the ransom, with a threat of mutilation in case of delay, and of death in case of refusal, as is their usual proceeding in cases of this sort. But nothing of the kind had occurred. No paper of any description had come from the mountain to Athens.

The idea of returning to France without his master greatly troubled Jack, for fear that he might be suspected of being the assassin, although he had not left the Hôtel d'Angleterre. He was at his wit's end, and more than ever did he rail at such journeys that took men into savage places, where robbers in fancy costumes shot them down as if they were rabbits.

A few days after the search had been abandoned, who should appear at the hotel but Stavros; but, ye gods! in what a condition!—pale, emaciated, haggard, dirty, like a spectre emerged from the grave without shaking off the earth. His rich, picturesque costume, of which he had been so vain, and which produced such a good effect upon travelers who were fond of local color, had been taken away from him, and replaced with sordid rags, all begrimed with mud and dirt; a greasy sheep-skin covered his shoulders, and no one would have recognized him as the favorite guide of tourists. His unexpected return was reported to the police, and he was arrested; for, although well known in Athens, and relatively honest, he had departed with a traveler and returned alone, a circumstance which the scrupulous guardians of the peace naturally considered suspicious. However, Stavios was able to demonstrate his innocence. His occupation as a guide was logically opposed to the idea that he would make way with the travelers from whom he derived his income; and, besides, there was no need for him to assassinate them in order to rob them. Why should he attack men who followed him of their own free will, and handed over to him their gold, or, at all events, a sufficient portion of it? But the story he told of Malivert's death was most extraordinary, and very difficult to believe. According to him, while they were riding peacefully along the ravine road, at the place where the carcass of the horse had been found, suddenly they were startled by the report of a fire-arm, followed almost immediately by another. The first shot killed the horse that Malivert was riding, and the second struck the traveler himself. Before he fell, however, he snatched one of his pistols from the holsters, and fired at random.

In another moment, three or four bandits dashed out of the bushes to despoil their victim. Two others compelled Stavros to descend from his horse, and held him by the arms, although he made no resistance, knowing that it would be useless.

Up to this point the recital differed but slightly from the ordinary tales of highway robbery; but what followed was far less credible, although the guide affirmed under oath that it was true. He declared that, close to the dying Malivert, whose face, instead of being contracted with agony, was radiant with a celestial happiness, suddenly appeared a figure of dazzling whiteness and marvelous beauty, who might have been the Panagia herself. and who placed upon the traveler's wound, as if to ease his suffering, a hand that glowed with a soft radiance. The brigands, frightened at the apparition, fled some distance away, and then the beautiful lady took the soul of the dead man and flew away with it to the skies.

It was impossible to make him vary in the slightest degree from this story. The body of the traveler was hidden by the brigands under a rock on the bank of a stream whose bed, always dry in summer, was filled with laurel roses. As for Stavros himself, as he was not worth the trouble of killing, after stripping him of his handsome clothes, the outlaws carried him away into the mountains, so that he should not be able to denounce the murder, and it was with great difficulty that he finally succeeded in effecting his escape.

Stavros was released; if he had been guilty, it would have been easy for him to gain the Isles or the shores of Asia with Malivert's money. His return proved his innocence. The story of Malivert's death was forwarded to Madame de Marillac, his sister, in almost the same words that Stavros had related it. The appearance of Spirite was even mentioned, but as an hallucination produced by the terror of the guide, whose brain did not appear to be very strong.

At almost the same hour in which the murder upon Mount Parnes took place, Baron de Féroë had retired, as was his habit, to the privacy of his apartments, and was engaged in reading that strange, mysterious work of Swedenborg's, which is entitled "Marriages of the Other Life."

In the midst of his reading, he felt a

peculiar sensation, a sort of warning of some revelation that was about to take place. Although there was no apparent reason for it, the thought of Malivert crossed his brain. The room was suddenly flooded with light, the walls became transparent, and opened like a hypethral temple, showing an immense depth of space, not the Heaven which human eyes are wont to gaze upon, but the Heaven which is pervious to the eyes of faith alone.

In the centre of an effervescence of light which seemed to come from the heart of the infinite, two points of an intensity of splendor greater still, scintillated, pulsated, and swayed gradually nearer, taking the appearance of Malivert and Spirite. They flew one near the other, in celestial, radiant joy, caressing one another with the tips of their wings.

Soon they came together, closer and closer still, until, like two drops of dew gliding along the same petal of a lily, they were finally merged into one single pearl.

"Behold, they are happy forever; their souls united form an angel of love!" murmured Baron de Féroë, with a melancholy smile. "And I—how long have I still to wait?"

Fortunio

CHAPTER I

GEORGE'S SUPPER

GEORGE was giving a supper to his friends—not to all, for he had fully two or three thousand—but simply to a few lions and tigers of his private menagerie.

George's suppers were renowned for their joyous elegance and delicate sensuality; and it was considered a stroke of good fortune to be the recipient of an invitation. But this favor was difficult to obtain, and few could boast of having their names frequently inscribed on the happy list. None but those who had stood the test of fire and water, and were acknowledged high dignitaries in the gay world, were admitted into this sanctuary.

The conditions were still more rigorous in regard to women: the most perfect beauty, the most exquisite corruption, and twenty years at the most. Although, at first glance, the second of these conditions seems easily fulfilled, one can readily understand why so few women were present at George's suppers. This evening, however, there were four: four superb creatures, four thoroughbreds—combinations of angels and demons, steel hearts within marble breasts—Cleopatras and Imperias with dainty feet—the most charming monsters imaginable.

Although the supper had every reason to be the gayest in the world, there was an apparent lack of animation. Good company, excellent viands, very old wines, very young women, lights brilliant enough to outshine a mid-day sun—all the elements that usually contribute to human joy—were combined to a degree rarely encountered; and yet a shade of melancholy darkened every brow. Even George vainly tried to conceal an annoyance and anxiety which the rest of the guests seemed to share.

The party had assembled at midnight, after the opera, and a magnificent Buhl clock, supported on a pedestal inlaid with pearl, was just striking one as they took their places at the table.

A vacant seat indicated the absence of one who had failed to keep his word.

The supper had therefore begun under the disagreeable impression of a useless delay, and of viands slightly overdone; for in cooking, as in love, there is a supreme moment which never returns, and which is extremely difficult to seize. The delinquent must assuredly have been a highly esteemed personage, for George—as great a gourmand as Aspicius himself—would not have delayed a quarter of an hour for a prince.

Musidora, the most piquant of the four goddesses, heaved a delicious sigh, like the cooing of a sick dove, which seemed to say: "I shall pass a dismal night and be horribly bored; this fête begins badly, and these young men look like deathheads."

"Confound it!" cried George, crushing between his fingers a priceless Venetian glass that expanded like a bell-flower on its auger-like stem, and was traversed by spiral milky veins. The broken bell-flower shed on the cloth, not drops of dew, but a few tears of old Rhine wine, more precious than Oriental pearls. "One o'clock, and that accursed Fortunio has not yet come!"

The beautiful girl seated beside the vacant chair reserved for Fortunio, was completely isolated on that side.

This place had been assigned to Fortunio as the place of honor, for Musidora belonged to the highest rank in beauty's aristocracy, and only lacked a scepter to be a queen; and this she might have obtained in a poetic century, in those fabulous days when kings married shepherdesses. It is not certain, however, that Musidora would have accepted a constitutional king.

She seemed terribly bored, and even yawned visibly two or three times; none of the guests interested her sufficiently to exercise her coquetry, and she remained cold and sullen as if entirely alone.

While awaiting Fortunio, let us take a glance at the room and the guests it contains.

The room is spacious and magnificent. Oaken wainscotings, enhanced with dead gold arabesques, ornate the walls; a preciously sculptured cornice, supported by cupids and fanciful figures encircles the ceiling, which is traversed by beams ornamented and carved into female figures, against a gold background, in the Gothic style, but with a more supple and delicate hand. Between the windows are small stands and buffets of antique design, supported by silver dolphins with golden fins and eyes, and tails twisted into the most fantastic figures. These buffets are loaded with plate engraved with the family coat-of-arms, and oddly shaped flagons containing unknown liquors. Rich, heavy curtains of nacarat velvet, lined with white silk and edged with golden fringe, cover the stained-glass windows, which are provided with triple blinds, that prevent any exterior noise from penetrating within, and vice versa. An immense chimney-piece, also of sculptured wood, occupies one end of the room; two figures with painted breasts and undulating hips—two living figures, worthy of the chisel of Jean Goufon or Germain Pilon, replace the supports, carrying on their shoulders a transversal lintel, delicately worked and covered with leaves of exquisite finish. Above this, a beveled Venetian mirror, very narrow, and placed on end, glistens in its magnificent frame. An entire forest seems to blaze in the mouth of his vast chimney, which is lined with white marble, and two enormous bronze dragons with scaled wings do the service of ordinary andirons. Three chandeliers of rock crystal, loaded with candles, hang from the ceiling like gigantic clusters from a miraculous vine twelve sconces of gilded bronze, representing the nude arms of slaves, project from the wainscoting, each hand holding a bunch of odd flowers from which the white jets of light flash like blazing pistils; and as a crowning magnificence, above the doors, four Titians of fabulous beauty, in all their passionate splendor, in all the opulence of their warm amber colorings—Venuses and royal favorites, proudly reclining in all their divine loveliness under the rosy shadows of the hangings, and smiling with the satisfaction of women sure of eternal beauty.

Count George prized these very highly, and he would have given twenty dining-rooms such as we have described, rather than one of his masterpieces; in want—if want could have overtaken Count George—he would have pawned his father's portrait his mother's ring, before parting with one of his beloved Titians. They were the only things he possessed of which he was proud.

In the center of this immense dining-room, imagine a large table covered with a damask cloth in which are woven the count's coat-of-arms with the crown and insignia of his house; a carved vase, representing a tiger and crocodile hunt by Indians mounted on elephants, occupies the middle of the table; Japanese and old Sevres plates, glasses of all shapes, knives inlaid with precious stones, and all utensils necessary to eat and drink long and delicately, filled the remaining space. Seated around the table are four fallen angels—Musidora, Arabelle, Phebe, and Cinthie—delicious girls paternally trained by the great George himself, and called the incomparables; among them are intermingled six young men—contrary to habit—whose smooth and fresh faces express the indolent security and assurance of men who enjoy the possession of an income of two or three hundred thousands pounds and the oldest names of France.

In his quality of host, George occupies a large arm-chair covered with Cordovan leather; the rest are seated on small Mazarin chairs of ebony covered with white and cherry lampas of exquisite rarity.

The attendants are four little negro boys, attired simply in puffed trunks of deep red silk, with glass necklaces, and gold bands around their arms and legs, such as we see in Paul Veronese's paintings. These little negroes circulate around the table with the agility of monkeys, serving the guests with the most precious wines of France, Hungary, Italy, and Spain; not from ignoble glass bottles, but from beautiful Florentine vases of admirably worked silver or precious stones; and yet, notwithstanding their nimbleness, they can scarcely supply the demands.

To enhance this royal elegance and luxury, inundate these crystals, bronzes, gildings, with a flood of light of a whiteness so blinding that the least detail sparkles and glistens vividly; a torrent of glaring light leaves in shadow nothing but the under side of the table, a dazzling atmosphere traversed by iris and prismatic rays that would outshine eyes and diamonds less beautiful than those of the incomparable Musidora, Arabelle, Phebe, and Cinthie.

At George's right beside Fortunio's vacant chair, is Musidora, the beautiful girl with sea-green eyes. She is scarcely eighteen. Never has imagination dreamed an ideal more charming and chaste; she might be taken for an animated vignette of Moore's "Angel's Love," so limpid and diaphanous is she. She seems to emit light rather than be illuminated by it: her hair, of a blonde so pale that it seems to melt into the transparent tint of her skin, falls on her shoulders in spiral waves;

a simple circle of pearls, almost in the form of a diadem, holds back the two streams of gold from her brow, and prevents them from uniting; the hair is so fine and silky that it is wafted by the faintest breath.

A pale green dress, embroidered in silver, enhances the ideal whiteness of of her bare neck and arms, around which are coiled two emerald serpents, with diamond eyes of disquieting reality. This completes her attire.

Her pale face, wherein shines an indescribable youth in its spring, is the supreme type of English beauty: a light down, like the bloom on the fruit, softens still more the beautiful outline, and the skin is of such delicacy that the light penetrates and illuminates it interiorly.

This oval of divine paleness, with its two clusters of blonde hair, its eyes bathed in vaporous languor, and its little, child-like mouth, which emits a humid reflection, bears an expression of modest melancholy and plaintive resignation that contrasts strangely with its surroundings. At first sight, Musidora might be taken for a statue of Modesty placed by hazard in an evil spot.

Yet, on closer observation, we discover certain expressions in her eyes a little less angelic, and from out the corners of her rosy lips, the wiggling of the tip of the dragon's tail; from the depths of her limpid eyes are reflected fibers like veins of gold in antique marbles, giving her glance something of the soft cruelty of the cat; sometimes the eyebrows have an undulating movement that betrays a profound and suppressed ardor, and the pupil of the eye is often dimmed as if by a tear that never overflows.

One arm hangs carelessly at her side, the other rests on the table; the lips are half opened, her glass untouched before her, her glance wandering; she is bored with that inexpressible weariness known only to those who have abused pleasures at an early age; and there is nothing new to Musidora but virtue.

"Come, Musidora, you are not drinking!" said George, raising the untouched glass to her lips and allowing the sweet liquor to filter drop by drop between her teeth.

Musidora made no resistance, displaying the most profound indifference.

"Do not tease her, George," said Phebe, half rising; "when she is in one of her sullen moods no one can obtain a word from her."

"By heavens!" cried George, setting down the glass; "if she will neither drink nor talk, I shall have to kiss her to prevent her from becoming entirely unsociable."

Musidora turned her head so quickly that George's lips barely touched the tip of her earring.

"Ah! Musidora is becoming monstrously virtuous," said George; "she will soon allow no one but her lover to kiss her, and yet I have inculcated her with the best principles. Musidora virtuous, Fortunio absent; the supper is indeed a failure!"

Since this so-much-desired Fortunio has not yet arrived, and as we cannot commence our story without him, we shall, with the reader's permission, sketch the portraits of Musidora's companions; for the same reason that we place an album in a visitor's hands when he is obliged to wait. Fortunio, who, if you please, will be the hero of this novel, is usually a very punctual young man, and it must have required very grave motives to prevent him from coming.

Phebe resembles Apollo's sister, without her chastity, and this is why she assumed the name, which for her is an irony.

She is tall and supple, and has the carriage of a bold huntress of olden times; her thin nose, with its pink and delicate nostrils, is joined to her forehead almost without sinuosity; her long, pointed eyebrows, her narrow eyelids, her round, pure mouth, her slightly elevated chin, her wavy hair, give her a wonderful resemblance to a Greek medallion.

Her costume is of piquant originality: a dress brocaded with silver, cut in the shape of a tunic, and held at the shoulders by large cameos; silk stockings of vaporous texture, so transparent as to reveal the rosy skin, and white satin slippers; a diamond crescent in her hair, black as night, and a necklace of brilliants, complete this elegant and fantastic costume.

Phebe is Musidora's friend, or rather her intimate enemy.

Cinthie, who reigns at the end of the table between two handsome young men, one of whom is her past and the other her future lover, is a veritable Roman of serious and royal beauty. She has none of the Parisian grace and coquetry; she is beautiful—she knows it, and she rests tranquilly in the assurance of her charms, as a warrior who has never been conquered.

She breathes slowly and regularly, just like a sleeping child; her gestures are extremely dignified, her movements rare and studied.

At this moment her chin is supported on the back of her white, shapely hand; the little finger capriciously bent, the crease in her wrist, the position of her arm, recall the graceful pose so much admired in the paintings of the old masters; the jet black hair, separated in two braids, left bare the little white ears, free from puncture, and that stand out from the head like those of a Green statue.

The transition from the jet black of her hair to the rich paleness of her brow is softened by warm shadows; a few light hairs on the temples moderate the precision of the eyebrows, and lighter, almost blonde, hair, redoubling in intensity near the nape, adorned the back of her neck, where the soft white skin forms the three beautiful creases called the necklace of Venus. Her firm white shoulders resemble the marble that Canova washed with diluted oxide of iron to attenuate the dazzling crudity and destroy the glaring luster of the polish.

Cleomene's chisel never produced anything more perfect, and the most charming contours of art are nothing beside this magnificent reality.

When she wishes to look aside, she does not turn her head, but simply slides the pupils into the corners of her eyes, illuminating them with an inexpressible light; then she slowly brings the pupils back into their place, without disturbing the immobility of her marble mask.

In the pride of her beauty, Cinthie disdains dress as an unworthy artifice. She owns but two dresses, one of black velvet, the other of white silk. She wears neither necklace nor earrings—not even a simple ring. What ring, what necklace, could be worth the beauty it conceals! Inspecting her wardrobe and jewels one day, a friend expressed astonishment at her excessive simplicity, and asked what she did on gala days.

"I loosen my dress, and let down my hair," she replied with Cornelian haughtiness.

This evening she wore her black velvet dress, without even the usual adjuncts.

As to Arabelle, I scarcely know what to say, except that she was a charming girl. A sovereign grace was betrayed at every movement, and her gestures were so soft, so harmonious, that they seemed like the essence of rhythm and music.

She was a Parisienne par excellence. She was not precisely beautiful, yet there was something so enticing in her manners, and her sentimentality was so highly spiced, that her admirers vowed she was the most perfectly beautiful woman in the world.

A slightly capricious nose, eyes of medium size, but sparkling with wit, a mouth slightly sensual, cheeks delicately colored, and framed in silky waves of auburn hair—in a word, the most bewitching face imaginable. As to the rest, she had small feet and hands, a slender waist, a well-turned ankle, and delicate wrists—all the marks of gentle birth.

I will spare you the description of her toilet, and will content myself with saying that she was dressed in the fashion of to-morrow.

"Upon my honor! I believe Fortunio will fail us!" exclaimed the host, emptying his glass at one draught. "The next time I meet him I shall propose a little contest at throat-cutting."

"I am of your opinion," said Arabelle; "but it is not easy to meet my lord Fortunio; hazard alone is skillful enough for that. Some time ago I had some business with him—not to cut his throat, however—but was unable to find him, although I searched high and low. I went to the bois, the bouffes, the opera, and even to church! but found no more trace of him than if he had never existed. Fortunio is a myth, not a man."

"What request had you to make, to be in such a hurry?" asked Musidora, casting an indolent glance in Arabelle's direction.

"The authentic slippers of a Chinese princess, who was once his mistress, as he told me one morning when a little intoxicated, and which he promised to give me as he kissed my foot, saying that I was the only woman in France who could wear them."

"Why not go to his home?" suggested Alfred, Cinthie's expectant lover.

"His home? That is easier said than done."

"Very true; he must be out a great deal—he has so many friends," added the lover.

"You do not understand me," retorted Arabelle; "to call at his home, one must know where he lives."

"He must, however, live somewhere, unless he roosts, which is quite possible," broke in George. "But perhaps some of your adorable princesses may know the branch of the miraculous tree on which this fine bird has built his nest?"

"If I knew it, count, I would not be here, I assure you," replied the silent Roman.

"Bah!" exclaimed Alfred; "we scarcely need a home nowadays—ladies understand hospitality so charmingly well. Come, which of you ladies shelters Fortunio?"

"How absurd!" said George, gravely. "Where would he keep his clothes and boots—he must have a home for his boots, at least. Moreover, we took supper with him not long ago—you were there, if I am not mistaken."

"True enough," replied Alfred; "what am I thinking of?"

"I was there also," rejoined Arabelle; "and his supper was much better than yours, my dear George, although you pride yourself on your kitchen. But what does that prove, unless it is that Fortunio is the most mysterious of mortals?"

"There is nothing mysterious in giving a supper to a score of friends."

"Certainly not; but this is where the mystery begins. I went to the house where Fortunio received us, and no one seemed to know who he was; no one there had ever heard of Fortunio. After many inquiries, however, I finally discovered that a young man answering Fortunio's description had purchased the house for two hundred thousand francs, which he paid on the spot in bank-bills. An army of workmen then immediately invaded the house, and put it in the condition we saw with a rapidity that seemed like enchantment. A number of servants in livery, a chef-de-cuisine, and a legion of assistants, carrying large baskets containing enough food to feed an army, had come, no one knew whence, the very night of the supper. The next morning all had disappeared; they had gone as they had come. Fortunio went out, and did not return; there was no one left but the old concierge, who remained to open the windows and air the rooms."

"If Arabelle had drank nothing but water at supper, I might believe what she says," interrupted Phebe; "but all this seems as unsubstantial as the bubbles of champagne that arise to the surface of my glass. She takes us for children, and relates fairy tales with a ridiculous gravity."

"Oh! indeed, is that your opinion?" retorted Arabelle in that dry tone which women assume toward each other; "my story is much more true than a great many."

"Never mind Phebe, Arabelle, and go on with your story," interrupted Musidora, whose curiosity was aroused.

"I tried by every means—I mean by the only means with which it is possible to corrupt something or somebody—to corrupt the virtuous dragon who guards this enchanted castle. I gave him a great deal of money, but although the conscientious rascal feared I might ask the return of my gold, he could tell me nothing for he knew nothing; an excellent reason for discretion. The worthy man, however, was so grieved to have no secret to betray, that he kindly offered to let me visit the house, hoping I might find some clue. Preceded by the old man, I examined everything carefully, and peered into the darkest corners, but I found nothing that would enlighten me; not the least scrap of paper, not a word, not a trace. I called on the merchant who sold the furniture, but he had not seen Fortunio; a middle-aged man, with the appearance of a steward and the craftiness of a usurer, had bought everything. We have all been the dupes of an hallucination, and we seriously believed we were taking supper with Fortunio."

"Strange, very strange, excessively strange!" muttered the elegant Alfred, who could now see double without the aid of a mirror. "Ha, ha! his creditors were badly fooled."

"Pshaw! he simply moved or went to the country; there is nothing mysterious in that," observed George.

"Who is Fortunio?" asked Phebe.

"Why, he is—Fortunio," volunteered Alfred. "What do you want to know for?"

"An excellent gentleman, one of the noblest men in the world," said George, meditatively; "my father and his were intimate friends; his coat-of-arms would not disgrace any carriage in the land!"

"He is very handsome," added Cinthie, "as handsome as Guido's Saint-Michel, at Rome, with which I was in love when I was a child."

"He has elegant manners, and is as witty as Mercutio," put in Arabelle.

"He is said to be fabulously rich, richer than all the Rothschilds put together, and as generous as the 'Magnificent' of La Fontaine's fable," chimed in Phebe.

"Who is the mistress of this happy personage, who seems to have had a fairy god-mother?" asked Musidora.

"No one knows, for discretion is one of Fortunio's many virtues; but it is assuredly none of you, for the happy one would have cried it from the house-tops," laughed George. "It will be you, if you wish—or rather if you can—for Fortunio seems proof against the arrows of Cupid, and the rays of your cat's eyes, though sharp and ardent, are not strong enough to pierce his armor."

"An English peer, with an income of six hundred thousand pounds, blew out his brains for me," retorted Musidora, with a disdainful pout.

"That may be; but you would cast yourself from the bridge, with your finest dress and newest hat, for Fortunio."

"Your Fortunio must be a demon! But, no matter, I wager he will be violently in love with me within six weeks!"

"If he were only a demon, you might easily accomplish it; deceiving his Satanic Majesty is but child's play for a woman."

"Is he, then, an angel?"

"Far from it. However, you can judge for yourself; I hear the noise of a carriage in the courtyard—it must be he."

"I wager my dappled grays against one of your trinkets that you will not find an opening as large as a mouse-hole to creep into his heart."

"Good! I shall go to Longchamp behind your dappled grays!" cried the girl, clapping her hands joyfully.

"Monsieur Fortunio," announced a tall, fantastically dressed mulatto, in a shrill voice that dominated the noise of conversation and the clinking of dishes.

Every head turned quickly to the door; the forks stopped half-way; the meal was suspended.

Fortunio advanced toward George

with a quick and firm step, and pressed his hand.

"Ha, ha! Welcome, Fortunio!—but what the deuce kept you so late?"

"Pray excuse me, ladies; I have just arrived from Venice, where I attended a very brilliant masked ball in the palace of the Princess Fiamma. I forgot to mention it to George when he met me at the opera and invited me to attend his nocturnal orgie. I have scarcely taken time to change my clothes."

"Ah! if you went to the ball at Venice, there is nothing more to be said; but, my dear Fortunio, I believe I saw you on the boulevard at Ghent less than a week ago. You lie like an epitaph or an official journal, my young friend."

"You are right; I was on the boulevard at Ghent with de Marcilly—what is there astonishing in that?"

"Oh! nothing—unless you possess Faust's traveling cloak, have discovered the secret of guiding balloons, or can ride on an eagle's back. This ubiquity seems hardly probable."

"Bah!" exclaimed Fortunio, tossing up his purse with a careless gesture; "I can travel faster astride of this than if I were mounted on a hippogriff. But I must drink; my tongue is almost hanging out. Mercury, bring forth the cup of Hercules!"

The cup of Hercules was a large chiseled vase, supported on the backs of twelve oxen, which the hardest drinkers attacked with apprehension.

"Mercury! pour a drop of some liquid in this thimble, for my thirst strangles me like a tight cravat."

Mercury, like the pages in the paintings of Terburg, held aloft a magnificently worked antique urn, the handles of which were two Cupids striving to kiss each other, and poured the contents into the cup.

Fortunio raised the heavy cup with a steady hand, and emptied it at a draught; an achievement that won him universal admiration.

"Oh! Mercury, is there not another drop of this wretched wine in your master's cellar? I crave another swallow."

The bewildered Mercury hesitated a moment, interrogated his master's eyes to see if he should obey; but George's eyes were enveloped in a misty cloud, and said exactly nothing.

"Well! you brute, must I repeat my orders? If I were your master, I would have you flogged and hanged by the feet until you knew better."

Mercury hastened to grasp another vase, and emptied its contents into the cup; he then retired to some distance, and stood on one foot like a heron in a marsh, awaiting the event with a sort of respectful anxiety.

The brave Fortunio exhausted the immense crater with a facility that proved long and patient study on the manner of "inhaling the dram," as Alcofribas Nasier would say.

"Now, gentlemen, we are on a level. I have made up for lost time, and we can now eat our supper quietly. You may have thought that I delayed through fear of the wine, and you have perhaps conceived the most horrible suspicions on my morals. But I must now be as pure in your minds as a three-months-old lamb or a school-girl."

"Ah! yes," remarked Alfred, "innocent and virtuous as a criminal on his way to the scaffold."

Fortunio's pretentious boast of having a quiet supper was truly exorbitant, and nothing in the world was more impossible. Jupiter might have come down through the ceiling with his eagle and thunderbolts without attracting attention.

Musidora was about the only one who had not lost her reason. Fortunio's presence aroused her from her torpor; she was now as wide awake as a snake long teased by a straw. Her green pupils sparkled strangely; the nostrils of her delicate nose were dilated, the corners of her mouth mischievously drawn. She no longer reclined on the cushion of her chair; she sat upright, on the alert, like a cavalier standing in his stirrups measuring the distance before striking. George's dappled grays were trotting through her brain. She already saw herself reclining on the cushions of the caleche, enveloped in a cloud of fashionable dust from the Bois de Boulogne.

Besides, Fortunio pleased her quite as well as George's four horses, and the turn-out was now of secondary importance in the perilous conquest she had undertaken. She was searching the depths of her armory for her most fatal glance, her most irresistible smile, to dart at Fortunio and pierce his heart through and through. While awaiting the moment for the decisive stroke, she observed him attentively, veiling her intentions with bantering words. She watched his every movement, casting up her fortifications around him and trying to imprison him in a net-work of coquetry; for he was the living type of that virile ideal dreamed by women, and which, unfortunately, we so rarely realize, preferring to abuse without measure our privilege of being homely.

Fortunio seemed twenty-four at the most. He was of medium height, well-built and robust, broadshouldered, and small hands and feet, and bore an expression of gentleness and resolution—an irresistible mixture of grace and strength. His movements were as velvety as those of a young jaguar, and under their nonchalant slowness, one felt a prodigious nimbleness and vivacity.

His head was the purest type of meridional beauty; his character rather Spanish than French, and more Arab than Spanish. The brush could trace no oval more perfect than that of his face; his delicate nose, slightly aquiline, terminating abruptly as if cut with shears, enhanced the feminine purity of the other features, and gave him a proud and heroic look; the eyebrows of velvety black, melting into bluish tints toward the extremities, were firmly traced above long lashes, and might have been dyed with *k'hol,* in the Oriental manner. By a charming oddity, the pupils of his sparkling eyes were of a heavenly blue, as limpid as the azure of a mountain lake, and an almost imperceptible brown circle surrounded them, enhancing their diamond brightness; the mouth was of that deep, moist red which indicates a purity of blood more and more rare. The wide lower lip breathed passionate ardor; the upper, more delicate, and arched with an expression of humoristic disdain, tempered by the benevolence of the rest of the physiognomy, indicated resolution, and a great power of will. A slight mustache concealed the corners of the mouth with its soft and silky shadows. The delicately rounded chin, with its small dimple, was united by a line of powerful curve to an athletic neck—the neck of a young steer, virgin of the yoke.

The forehead, though it had not the prodigious elevation and triumphal proportions of a poet's brow, was wide and noble, the temples full, without the least wrinkle, and with satiny shades on the portions usually covered with hair; the forehead was much whiter than the rest of the face—which a sun more ardent than ours had bronzed—and tints of rose and blue revived with their freshness the dryness of that beautiful warm shade, so dear to artists. His slightly wavy hair, as black as a raven's wing, fell about this pale mask in studied disorder. The ear was small, colorless, and seemed to have been pierced.

As far as the hideous modern costume permitted one to see, his form seemed admirably proportioned, at once supple and strong: muscles of steel under a velvet skin, something like the model of the Indian Bacchus in the Museum of Antiquities, and which for perfect harmony rivals the Venus of Milo; for nothing can be more beautiful than a combination of grace and strength. Under the dazzling whiteness of his linen, one could imagine a broad chest, smooth and firm as marble—a charming resting-place for a woman's head. Arms as beautifully modeled as those of Antinous, terminating in hands of inimitable perfection, could easily be imagined within his tight-fitting sleeves.

We will omit the rest of his costume; even a bolder writer would recoil in horror from the description of a modern dress suit. You can easily imagine it by recalling the masterpieces of the classic Parisian tailors that you have admired on the backs of some marvelous beings at concerts or theaters; only add, mentally, a half-aristocratic, half-nonchalant elegance, an easy and confident modesty, an unconscious grace, and manners you have certainly never seen in any of those marvelous beings; lastly, on the index finger of the left hand, a diamond of enormous size, of a quality to rival the Regent and the Sancy, and which cast flashes of brilliant light right and left.

Although Musidora assumed an air of easy indifference, she was nevertheless a prey to violent emotions.

A refined instinct, a deeply rooted admiration for beauty, had preserved her from loving until now. Notwithstanding her gay life, she had remained in absolute ignorance of the divine passion. Her too early awakened senses were silent, or nearly so, and all her liaisons, so easily contracted and broken, had been formed through interest or mere caprice. Like all women who have seen a great deal of life, men inspired her only with profound disgust. A woman of her sphere learns more of a man in one day than an honest woman can learn in ten years; for with her he shows himself in his true character, and makes no attempt at dissimulation. And when a man inspires love under these conditions, he is always frantically loved.

Musidora considered all men very contemptible and ugly. The exterior of the box pleased her no better than the interior. Those insignificant or disfigured faces, earthly or apoplectic, darkened by beard and furrowed with wrinkles, the coarse, straight hair and the rough, sinewy arms, charmed her but little. The extreme delicacy of her nature rendered all these defects still more repugnant to her; a man who was but a robust man to Cinthie, appeared like a wild boar to her. Musidora, although eighteen, was not really a woman, not even a young girl, she was a child—a child, it is true, as corrupt as a colonel of dragoons; and concealing under a frail envelope a hyper-diabolic malice with her candid air, she would have duped a cardinal or outwitted a Talleyrand. She consequently possessed marvelous advantages over her rivals, for her well-known coldness and indifference gave her an appearance of innocence that was truly charming. In spite of her mode of life, she had all the piquancy of a strictly guarded young girl, and she had always been adroit enough to throw the glamour of virtue over her actions. Her arts, however, were less successful on this occasion. In spite of all her artifice and coquetry, Fortunio paid no more attention to her than any well-bred man would show a woman who was his neighbor. He simply gave her those half-familiar little attentions that are always accorded a pretty woman, and which count for so little.

Musidora concentrated all her energies to draw him into a more intimate conversation, and force some of those gallant phrases from his lips which might be construed into a tacit declaration. But Fortunio, like a wary fish, played prudently around her nets, without becoming entangled in the meshes. He answered her insidious questions by evasive replies, and at the very moment when she believed him caught he would escape her by an abrupt pleasantry.

Musidora left no means untried. She endeavored to win his confidences by relating pretended secrets; she questioned him on his travels, on his life, on his tastes. Fortunio drank, ate, laughed, answered with a yes or a no, and slipped through her fingers like quicksilver.

"Really, George," said Musidora, leaning toward the host, "this man is like a hedgehog; it is hard to tell how to take him."

"Be careful, or you will leave your heart on one of his bristles, my little queen," replied George.

"What sort of life must he have led, and into what kind of stone is he petrified?" asked Musidora uneasily.

"The devil alone knows," he retorted, with an indescribable shrug of the shoulders.

"Fortunio! Fortunio!" called Arabelle from the other end of the table; "what about the Chinese princess' slippers? when are you going to give them to me?"

"My beautiful lady, they are now in your room, delicately resting on the tiger-skin that serves as a carpet at the foot of your bed."

"You are laughing at me, Fortunio. You have never entered my bedroom, and there were certainly no slippers at the foot of my bed last night."

"You did not look very carefully, for I assure you they are there," replied Fortunio, swallowing a bumper.

Arabelle smiled incredulously.

"Is it true?" asked Musidora, with a shade of jealous coquetry; did these slippers really belong to a Chinese princess?"

"Certainly," replied Fortunio. "Her name was Yeu-Tseu. A charming girl! She had a silver ring in her nose and gold spangles on her forehead. I composed sonnets in her honor, comparing her skin to jade and her eyes to willow leaves."

"Was she prettier than I am?" interrupted Musidora, turning her face to Fortunio, as if to facilitate the comparison.

"That depends. She had small, bright eyes, drawn up at the corners, a flat nose, and red teeth."

"Oh! the monster! She must have been hideous!"

"Not at all; she was considered an incomparable beauty; all the mandarins doted on her."

"And did you love her?" asked Musidora in a vexed tone.

"She adored me, and I did not object."

"Do you know, Monsieur Fortunio, that you are prodigiously conceited?—or else you are laughing at us? You bought these slippers from some curiosity shop on the quay Voltaire."

"No, indeed; I swear it—you questioned me, and I answered. As for the slippers, they were not purchased; who has not been to China? May I help you to a glass of this wine? it is excellent."

"You need not take the trouble," said Musidora, smiling graciously; "hand me your own glass."

Fortunio obeyed without showing the least astonishment at this favor. Musidora placed her lips where his own had just touched.

When she handed it back, Fortunio refilled it, and emptied it as indifferently as if a young and charming girl had not just dipped her rosy beak into it.

Musidora was not daunted. By a skillful movement she cast off her satin slipper and placed her foot on Fortunio's; the little Cinderella foot was encased in a silk stocking as delicate as a spider web, and which revealed all its perfection and ivory polish.

"Do you think I could wear your princess' slippers, Fortunio?" she asked, a tinge of red coming into her cheeks as she pressed his foot with hers.

"They would be too large for you," he replied quietly, as he raised his glass to his lips.

This might have passed for a compliment had it not been for Fortunio's indolent tone; and Musidora did not augur favorably from it. Seeing that her efforts were in vain, she changed her tactics, assumed an indifferent air—without withdrawing her foot, however—and turned to George. Coldness was not more successful than coquetry. Fortunio merely addressed her a word now and then, and that evidently only through politeness. For a moment she thought he pressed her knee slightly, but she soon realized her error.

It is needless to say that during all this strategy the rest of the party drank heavily, and abandoned themselves to the most triumphant bacchanalian feast imaginable. The elegant Alfred called loudly for the heads of tyrants and the abolition of slavery, to the great bewilderment of the little negroes, who were astonished by his sudden philanthropy. Two of the party had fallen under the table, and were snoring as loudly as church deacons; the rest were cackling or whining, I know not what song, in a doleful and mournful air. Now and then one of them would interrupt this agreeable occupation to relate some famous story to himself, for no one else was sober enough to listen.

The women resisted longer, but were finally drawn into this vortex. Arabella was so overcome that she forgot to be coquettish. Phebe was leaning with her two elbows on the table, staring stupidly at one of the figures of a vase without seeing it.

The Roman girl was admirable in her quiet contentment; she swayed her head to and fro as if keeping time to some melody heard by herself only, a vague smile hovered about her slightly parted lips, like a bird about a rose, and the long, dark eyelashes threw velvety shadows on her rosy cheeks. One hand was resting on the other, like the Roman girl in M. Ingres' beautiful portrait, and her perfect calmness contrasted strangely with the general turbulence.

The last glass of wine taken by Musidora was beginning to produce its effect; small drops of perspiration pearled her brow; fatigue was overpowering her in spite of herself. A few grains of sleep's golden sands were filling her eyes; she was going to sleep like a little bird nestling in its downy nest. From time to time she raised her heavy eyelids to glance at Fortunio, whose clear-cut profile stood in relief against the background of dazzling light; then she closed them again, without ceasing to see him, for her snatches of dreams were filled with Fortunio. At last her head drooped like a flower weighed down by dew, and shading her eyes with her beautiful blonde hair, she fell fast asleep.

"Ah!" exclaimed George, "Musidora has tucked her head under her wing. Look at her adorable little nose! she would sleep in the midst of a concerto of drums. She is a very pretty girl, but I prefer my Titians. Between ourselves, Fortunio, I will admit that I have never loved anyone but that beautiful girl above the door over there, asleep on her red velvet couch. Look at that hand, that arm, that shoulder! What an exquisite picture! What power of life and color! Ah! if you could only open those beautiful arms, and press me against your throbbing heart, I would willingly throw all these women out of the window! By the gods! I am tempted to hang it in my bedroom."

"There, there! George, carissimo; softly, softly. You grieve me; you will work yourself into a fever if you fret thus in your harness. Preserve yourself for your respectable parents, who want to make a statesman and a minister of you. You are wrong to despise nature; it has its worth. You rave over that painted woman's shoulders; why! look over there at Cinthie, whose eyes are fixed in silence on the ceiling, thinking, perhaps, of her first love, and the little brick house in which she was born—she has shoulders more beautiful than all the Titians in Venice and in Spain. Come hither, Cinthie; show us your beautiful neck and shoulders, and convince this rogue that nature is not as awkward as he thinks."

The beautiful Roman arose, walked gravely toward them, allowed the bands of her dress to slip from her shoulders, and displayed a neck and shoulders of such purity and admirable contours that the gods might be tempted to kiss them.

"Look at this admirable picture, my dear George; nothing is wanting but the frame," said Fortunio, placing his hand on Cinthie's shoulder with the indifference of an artist running his thumb over the outlines of a marble statue to assure himself of their correctness.

"You may return to your place; we have seen you enough," he added to Cinthie.

The Roman walked slowly back to her chair, while George still repeated, "I prefer my Titians."

The candles were waxing low; the little negroes dozed, leaning wearily against the walls. The finely decorated table was in the most frightful disorder; the cloth stained with wine and scattered with the debris of the feast; the elegant edifices of sweet-meats were crumbled and shapeless; the marvelous desserts, pine-apples, Chilian strawberries, all kinds of delicious fruits, arranged so temptingly, were now lying about in the wildest disorder; the table looked like a battle-field. A few of the guests, however, were still energetically struggling against sleep and drunkenness, but all had lost their nerve and animation; they had scarcely life enough to be noisy, or strength enough to break the porcelains and crystals—a means often used to reanimate languishing orgies.

Even George had reached that state of intoxication in which we preach morals and extol the charms of virtue. Fortunio alone appeared fresh and clear-witted, as calm and subdued as a devotee, and toyed carelessly with his knife, seeming quite ready to begin all over again.

"What!" he exclaimed, "is there nothing more to drink? What poor hospitality! I am as parched as the earth that has not felt the rain for a fortnight."

An immense bowl of lighted punch was brought in, the pretty flames dancing joyously on the surface like will-o'-the-wisps.

Without extinguishing the flame, George filled Fortunio's glass and his own; then grasping the bowl by its pedestal, dashed it to the floor with a gesture of inexpressible contempt, crying: "I would not profane such liquor by offering it to these brutes. Let us roast them, since they cannot drink; we may do it without compunction, for they are nothing but geese."

The flaming liquid spread over the carpet; the little tongues of bluish flame lapped the feet of the sleepers, and bit the edges of the table-cloth. The light of this improvised illumination quickly penetrated the heavy eyelids, and everybody awoke with a start. The two respectable guests, who had been stranded at the beginning of the tempest, would have roasted alive if Mercury and Jupiter had not dragged them from their subterranean refuge.

"Where is Fortunio?" asked Musidora, brushing back her disordered hair.

"He was here a moment ago," replied George.

"He has gone," volunteered Jupiter respectfully.

"The devil knows when we shall see him again. He has probably gone to breakfast with the Grand Mogul or some of his high priests. I am afraid you will have to go home on foot or in a hired cab, like a virtuous girl, my little queen. You are very clever if you find him again."

"Bah! I have his purse," said Musidora, drawing from her bosom a small pocket-book with gold corners.

"What an accomplished girl! You must be the devil's daughter; ordinary parents never think of teaching their daughters to steal!"

CHAPTER II

MUSIDORA'S HOME

MUSIDORA did not awaken until the reasonable hour of three in the afternoon. She lazily extended her pretty arm toward the bell-rope beside her bed, but the white hand fell back on the coverlet.

Musidora's bed was of extreme simplicity, resembling in nothing the beds of enriched trades-people, which are usually decorated like their show-windows; it was as fresh and charming as the heart of a wild-flower.

Double curtains of white cashmere and India muslin fell in fleecy clouds from an enormous silver rose on the ceiling, around an elegant gondola of pale citron-wood, with ivory legs and incrustations; sheets of Holland linen of ideal fineness, a mere misty web, scarcely concealed the soft, rosy fabric that enveloped the mattress, filled with the finest Thibet wool. This precious fleece, which was probably the golden fleece that Jason went in quest of on the Argo, seemed to Musidora barely good enough to fill her mattresses. A double pillow, trimmed with lace, yielded tenderly to the pressure of the little head bathed in golden hair, spread around her like the stream flowing from a naiad's urn. A coverlet of white satin, filled with the precious down the eider plucks from its wings to warm its young, was spread over her like a light fall of snow, and under the undulations of the coverings could be seen a charming little monticule formed by her half-raised knee.

Such was this beautiful child's bed. For this bed, Africa had contributed the tusks of its largest elephants; America, its most precious wood; Asia, its muslin, wool, and cashmere; Norway, its down; France, its industry. The whole universe had been ransacked, and each country had given its utmost luxury.

None but a courtesan who has been fed on green apples in childhood can spit on riches with such insolent impudence. Heliogabale and Seguin experienced no greater pleasure in polluting gold and rendering it despicable, than did this child called Musidora.

Yet, all this did not prevent this child's bed from being, as we have already said, of the most virginal simplicity; and the rest of her room was as ruinously simple. The walls and ceiling were hung with white satin, caught up with silver and rose-colored tassels; a white carpet, thick as the grass on a lawn, and sprinkled with roses, covered the floor; the doors, cut in the hangings with such precision that they were scarcely seen, had locks and knobs of beautifully cut Irish crystal. The clock was a block of Oriental jasper, with a dial of hammered platinum—a time-piece which no tailor would own. Beside the bed was a small Etruscan lamp of most authentic shape, in red clay, with delightful designs of fantastic winged creatures and women at their toilets, supported by a small round stand. A few chairs, the indispensable sofa, and a mosaic table, completed the furniture.

Musidora opened her little mouth to its utmost, without, however, producing a very formidable yawn; her pearly teeth sparkled like drops of dew in the hollow of a red poppy, and produced the most charming effect—a yawn from

Musidora was more graceful than the smile of any other woman.

She again closed her eyes, turned on the left side, then on the right, and seeing that she could hope to sleep no longer, gave vent to a melodious sigh, as full of reverie and thought as a note from Beethoven.

She stretched her arm a second time toward the bell.

An imperceptible door, hidden in the wall, opened slightly, and through the narrow aperture glided a tall, graceful girl, coquettishly dressed, and wearing a bright handkerchief on her head, like a Creole.

She came softly to the foot of her mistress' bed, and awaited her orders in silence.

"Jacinthe, raise the curtains a little, and help me to sit up."

Jacinthe looped back the curtains, and a joyous, petulant ray of sunshine danced gayly into the room, like an ill-bred boy, who is usually well-received on account of his bright humor.

"Imbecile! do you want to blind me, and tan me as black as the snout of a bear, or the hands of a tight-rope dancer?" cried Musidora, in a plaintive voice. "Shut out that frightful sun! Good. Now fix my pillows."

Jacinthe took up a couple of pillows, shook them, and arranged them comfortably behind her mistress' back.

"What else does madame wish?" asked Jacinthe, seeing that Musidora did not give the usual signal of dismissal.

"Tell Jack to bring my English cat, and have my bath prepared."

The door opened slightly, and Jacinthe disappeared.

Chapter III

BENEFITS

We do not think it too much to consecrate a special chapter to Musidora's cat, a charming animal, as worthy of notice as Androcles' lion, Pelisson's spider, Montargis' dog, and other virtuous or sagacious animals, whose memory grave historians have immortalized.

It is often said that a man may be judged by his dog; it may be said with equal truth that a woman may be judged by her cat.

Musidora's cat was white, but of a fabulous white—whiter than the whitest swan; milk, alabaster, snow, all that has served for *white* comparisons since the beginning of the world, would seem black by the side of this cat. Among the millions of imperceptible hairs which composed her ermine fur, there was not a single one that was not as dazzling as the purest of silver.

Imagine an enormous powder puff, with eyes adjusted into it. Never has the most coquettish and affected woman had in her movements the grace and perfect finish of this adorable cat. She had incomparable undulations of the spine, curvatures of the back, tosses of the head, curls of the tail, and unimaginable ways of advancing her paws.

Musidora copied her as far as she could, but without attaining the success she desired. But though the imitation was imperfect, it had made of Musidora one of the most graceful women in Paris—that is to say, in the world, for nothing exists here below but Paris.

A little negro, dressed entirely in black, to make the contrast more striking, was intrusted with the care of this white and discreet personage. He tucked her into her cradle of sky-blue satin every night, and carried her to her mistress when she called for her every morning; he also fed Madame Pussy, combed her fur, washed her ears, smoothed out her mustaches, and put on her necklace—a necklace of genuine pearls of priceless value.

Some virtuous mortals may cry out in indignation at such luxury for a simple animal, and say that it would be far better to use this money in giving bread to the poor. To begin with, we do not give bread to the poor—we give them a penny, and that seldom enough; for if everybody gave them a penny every day, they would soon be richer than nabobs. Then, we wish to say to the honest, philanthropic distributors of economical soup that the existence of Musidora's cat was as useful as that of anybody else.

She pleased Musidora, and while amusing her kept her from abusing her servants—first benefit.

The little negro, who had nothing to do but to take care of this animal, would, without her existence, have been roasting under a tropical sun and been lashed from morning till night. Instead of that he was well-fed, well-dressed, and had nothing to do but be black beside a white thing—second benefit.

This delicious cat had no greater pleasure than to sharpen her claws on the interior hangings of her little sky-blue boudoir. She consequently required new furnishings about every month. The cost of this sufficed to pay the tuition of the two children of Musidora's upholsterer. France will therefore owe a lawyer and a doctor to a simple white cat—third benefit.

Fourth benefit: Three little peasants earned enough to purchase a substitute some day, if pressed into the army, by trapping little birds for the cat's breakfast and dinner, for she would not eat them if they were not alive and hopping. This sweet and charming animal, almost as cruel as an idle woman, loved to hear her dinner chirp in her stomach, and there was nothing too much alive for her. This was her only bad quality, as far as we know.

As to the necklace, it was given to Musidora by a general of the empire, who had stolen it from a black madonna in Spain; Musidora had worn it as a bracelet, and it had passed without intermediary from her white arm to the still whiter neck of the cat. And, indeed, we consider a pearl necklace much more becoming around the velvety neck of a pretty cat than around the red and scrawny neck of an old woman.

Some of our readers may think this a digression, and we agree with them. But were it not for digressions and episodes, how could we write a novel or a poem—and then how could they be read?

Chapter IV

AROMAS

When the little negro had brought the white cat and placed it on the snowy eider-down beside her, Musidora, now wide awake, began to remember a certain Fortunio whom she had seen the preceding night at George's supper.

The features of that charming image outlined themselves clearly in her memory—she again saw him, handsome, smiling, calm in the midst of that turbulence, as inaccessible to drunkenness as to love.

She remembered the wager she had made to enter the fortress of that impregnable heart with beating drums and flying colors within six weeks, and warm her feet at the fireside of this elegant vagabond, whose real home no one knew.

The brilliantly varnished caleche, harnessed to the four dapple grays, with its postilion in satin livery and its cracking of whips, passed before her eyes like a whirlwind.

She felt so sure of success that she clapped her little hands with joy. "How funny it will be," she cried, laughing to herself, "to promenade Fortunio in the very carriage he will have won for me."

To open hostilities, she reached under the pillow, and drew out the stolen pocket-book she had vainly tried to open the previous night.

"I shall open it," she said, turning it over and over. "What woman who scents a secret behind so thin a wall would not force it! I shall untie the Gordian knot without having recourse to the sword, like that brutal Alexander."

Musidora now sat upright, and with the activity of a weasel seeking a hole to insert its pointed nose into a cupboard filled with milk and fresh eggs, she searched for the secret that would open this mysterious pocket-book, in which she hoped to find precious information concerning its owner.

With fingers more subtle than the tentacles of an insect or the horns of a snail, she felt every nerve and wrinkle of the skin; she pressed one by one each turquoise with which both sides were ornamented; she pressed with all her force on the clasps, hoping to break the springs; but she might as well have tried to break an iron safe.

She worked with such eagerness that the perspiration bathed her velvet brow; it was a very long time since she had worked so zealously.

At last, despairing of opening the faithful pocket-book, she rang for Jacinthe, and called for a pair of scissors to cut a piece out of the cover and draw out the papers and letters it contained.

But the skin was not even scratched by the points of the fine English scissors.

It was made from a lizard or serpent skin, and Musidora had mistaken the scales for embossing; it was harder than the skin of a peasant or a buffalo, and all incision was impossible.

Musidora, however, happened to touch the secret spring that opened the pocket-book, and the clasps flew back with the abruptness of a surprise-box.

She was so startled that she dropped it on her lap, fully expecting to see an irritated genie come out of it as from the magic bottles in Arabian tales, or an asp sitting on the end of its twisted tail ready to dart at her. Pandora did not stand more terrified before the box whose cover she had raised, and from which escaped all the ills and woes of this life through a cloud of black smoke.

Seeing that nothing came out, however, she was reassured, and picked it up to examine it and make an inventory of its contents.

An odd, exotic, and intoxicating perfume, unlike any odor she knew, filled the room and agreeably affected the olfactory nerve of the pretty, curious creature.

She stopped a moment to breathe this strange aroma, then again plunged her pretty fingers into the compartments of the pocket-book, which were lined with China silk of silvery hue, with reflections of gold and green.

The first thing she extracted was a singularly shaped large flower, whose color seemed to have faded long ago. This flower was the *Pavetta Indica,* of which Doctor Rumphius speaks in his *Hortus Malabaricus.*

This was not very indicative concerning his lordship Fortunio.

Musidora next drew out a small tress of blue hair, intermingled with gold threads, with a pierced gold bangle on each end; then a sheet of Chinese paper covered with odd characters, interwoven together on a background of silvery flowers. There was every reason to believe that it might be some plaintive epistle from the Princess Yeu-Tseu to the perfidious Fortunio.

Musidora scarcely knew what to think of this fantastically filled pocket-book. Hoping, however, to make some more intelligible and European discovery, she emptied the other two compartments. She found only a gold needle, rusty and red at the point, and a small piece of parchment decorated with a lot of scribbling, probably the writing of some Oriental nation.

In her disappointment she angrily threw the pocket-book to the middle of the room.

"Alas!" she said, looking at her pretty little fingers bruised by the work with an air of profound commiseration; "alas! I will not have the caleche nor Fortunio. Jacinthe carry me to my bath."

Jacinthe wrapped her mistress in a large muslin wrapper, took her in her arms and carried her away like a sick child.

CHAPTER V

FAILURE

MUSIDORA was assuredly much disappointed; and we are fully as vexed as she.

We had counted much on the pocket-book to give our readers (pardon our conceit) some exact information concerning this problematic personage. We had hoped to find in this pocket-book love-letters, plans of tragedies, novels in two volumes or more, or at least visiting-cards, as there should be in the pocket-books of all well-circumstanced heroes.

Our embarrassment is cruel! Since Fortunio is the hero of our choice, it is only natural that we should take some interest in him, and desire to know all his movements. We must speak of him often; he must dominate all other personages, and we must bring him, dead or alive, to the end of our two hundred and some odd pages. But no hero was ever so inconvenient; you await him, and he does not come; you have him, and he disappears without a word, instead of making fine speeches and giving vent to noble sentiments in poetic prose, as his position of hero in a novel demands.

He is handsome, it is true; but, between ourselves, I believe him odd, malicious as an ape, full of conceit and caprices, more changeable in humor than the moon, more variable than the skin of the chameleon. To these failings, which we would willingly forgive him, he adds that of never telling his business to anybody, which is unpardonable. He contents himself with laughing, drinking, and being a man of elegant manners. He makes no dissertations on passions or the metaphysics of the heart, reads no fashionable novels, and of adventures relates nothing but his intrigues in China or Malay, which can in no way injure the great ladies of the noble faubourg; he does not gaze at the moon in melancholy abstraction, and never speaks of actresses. In a word, he is but a mediocre man, to whom—I know not why—everybody ascribes wit, and whom we very much regret having taken as the principal personage of our novel.

Indeed, we have a good mind to drop him. Suppose we took George in his place?

Bah! he has the abominable habit of getting drunk morning and evening, sometimes during the day, and sometimes even during the night. What would you say, madam, of a hero who would be always intoxicated, and who would dissert for two hours on the difference between the right and the left wing of a partridge?

Suppose we take Alfred?

He is too stupid.

And de Marcilly?

Not stupid enough.

We must then keep Fortunio, in default of something better; the first news we receive from him we shall let you know. Let us then, if you please, enter Musidora's bath-room.

Chapter VI

THE PEARLS

Musidora's bath-room was of octagonal shape, covered with small white and blue porcelain squares to the height of the windows.

Pale green camaieu paintings, representing mythological subjects, such as Diana and Calisto, Salmacis and Hermaphrodite, Hylas borne away by the nymphs, Leda surprised by the swan, in carved frames of reeds and marine plants, occupied the spaces above the doors, which were concealed by Persian draperies; shells, corals, and madrepores were ranged on the cornice, and completed the aquatic decorations.

The windows, of azure blue and pale green, allowed only a subdued light to penetrate into this mysterious retreat; it might have been mistaken for the palace of an undine or a naiad.

A beautiful tub of white marble occupied one end of the room; an elegant couch occupied the other end.

Jacinthe carried Musidora to the edge of the bathtub, while two beautiful maids plunged their rosy arms into the steaming water to equalize the temperature of the water. During this operation, Musidora, in a pair of Turkish sandals, promenaded around the room, complaining, in a languishing voice, of the slowness and awkwardness of her servants, with as much gracious impertinence as a duchess. She finally approached the tub, which was lined with the finest of linen, slowly raised her little foot, and dipped her toe into the water.

"Jacinthe, hold me," she said, sinking back on the shoulder of the kneeling servant; "I feel faint."

Then, in a harsh voice that accorded little with her languishing and affected manner, she suddenly screamed:

"Do you want to scald me alive, and make me as red as a lobster for the next ten days? I am sure the skin will come off my foot with my stocking this evening! Will you never learn how to prepare a bath?"

The servants cooled the water. Then Musidora hazarded her other foot, knelt, crossed her arms on her breast, like the ancient statue of Modesty, and finally stretched out her full length like a serpent forced to uncoil. Then followed more complaints: the linen was so coarse that it scratched her skin; it was done on purpose—and so on; in a word, she uttered all the complaints that a bad temper and disappointed curiosity can inspire in a pretty, willful woman who has never been contradicted in her life.

The gentle warmth of the bath soon soothed her nervous anger, however, and she allowed her pretty arms to float on the water, raising them now and then, and amusing herself with childish curiosity in watching the water rolling right and left in transparent waves.

Jacinthe now entered, and whispered in Musidora's ear that Arabelle wished to see her.

"Tell her to come in," said Musidora, pleased at the opportunity of giving the lie to Arabelle, who had once said that she was thin.

"Well, my love, how are you?" asked Arabelle, as she leaned over her friend and kissed her.

"Passably well; my health is improving. I am growing fat, am I not?" said the vindictive little creature, fixing her cat-eyes on Arabelle, who could not help blushing.

"Why, you are as plump as a little pheasant," she replied. "But do you know what brings me?"

"No; and do you?" laughed Musidora.

"First, the pleasure of seeing you."

"And then?—for that would be a poor motive."

"I come to announce the most absurd, unimaginable, foolish, impossible thing, that upsets all preconceived ideas. If I believed in the devil, I would say it was the devil in person."

"Then, have you seen the devil, Arabelle? You must introduce me, since you know him!" cried Musidora, half credulously. "I have long wished for the pleasure of meeting him."

"You remember the Chinese princess' slippers that Fortunio promised me? Well, I found them, as he said, on the tiger-skin at the foot of my bed. Every door was locked, and that of my bedroom opens with a combination known only to myself. Is it not strange?"

"Fortunio must be a demon in a dress-coat and white gloves."

"There is, perhaps, some hidden door, of which he has the secret," said Musidora, with a venomous smile.

"No; I keep my diamonds and jewelry in that room, and it has but one door, which I carefully locked before going to George's supper. Can you make it out? But here are the slippers."

Arabelle drew from her bosom two little slippers of Chinese design, fantastically embroidered with gold and pearls.

"Why, they are the purest Oriental pearls!" cried Musidora, examining them attentively; "it is a more precious gift than you think. Look at these two! Cleopatra's pearls were not more beautiful."

"My lord Fortunio is truly of Asiatic magnificence, but he is also as invisible as an Oriental king; he shows himself only when he pleases. I fear you will lose your wager, my dear Musidora."

"I am afraid I will, Arabelle. I feigned sleep, and stole his pocket-book while he was talking to George. At first I could not open it, and I spent two hours in finding the mysterious sesame that opened the clasps and revealed the precious secrets so carefully guarded; but, as if he had guessed my intentions, I found nothing but a withered flower, a needle, and two scraps of paper with the most horrible scribbling on them. Is it not ridiculous?"

"May I see the pocket-book?" asked Arabelle.

"Certainly. I was so angry, I threw it on the floor in my room. Go and get it, Jacinthe."

Jacinthe soon returned with the hieroglyphic pocket-book.

Arabelle smelled it, turned it over, examined all the corners, but discovered nothing new; she looked thoughtfully at it for a few moments in silence, and then cried suddenly:

"Musidora! I have an idea. These papers are written in some language or other; we must go to the College of France, where they have professors for all languages that do not exist, and find some savant who can explain the enigma."

"Jacinthe! Marie, Annette! come here, quick! and take me out of this tub, where I have been molding for the last hour. I can feel the rushes growing on my arms, and my hair is as slimy as a water nymph's!" cried Musidora, starting up in the tub, the sparkling drops of water clinging to her body like a net of pearls. She looked like a sylph emerging, at the first ray of the moon, from the heart of the campanula which has served her as a refuge during the day.

The servants hastened to sponge the last tears of the naiad from her body, enveloped her carefully in a large cashmere wrapper and a Turkish shawl, encased her feet in dainty slippers lined in swan's-down, and leaning on Jacinthe's shoulder, she passed into her dressing-room with her friend Arabelle.

The servants combed her hair, perfumed her, put on her shoes, dressed her piece by piece, without the least aid from her; but when they had finished, she arose, stood before the mirror, and, like a master giving the finishing touches to a work executed by his pupils, she untied a bit of ribbon, rearranged a fold, ran her taper fingers through her hair, disarranging the too exact symmetry, and giving expression, life, and poetry to the inanimate work of her maids.

They then partook of a hasty breakfast, and Jack announced that the carriage was waiting.

But we will not commence our next chapter and enter the carriage without describing Musidora's toilet.

She wore a white India muslin dress with tight-fitting sleeves, a fine straw hat with a bunch of small flowers of ideal delicacy; a Venetian black lace mantle, thrown gracefully over her shoulders and confined at the waist, displayed admirably the rich folds of the dress, from under the edge of which peeped the daintiest feet in the world. Add to that a necklace of large jet beads, black silk mitts, and a tiny watch, smaller than a five-franc piece, suspended to a plain silk cord, and you will have Musidora's complete costume —a thing as important to know as the precise date of the death of Pharaoh Amenoteph.

CHAPTER VII

UNDECIPHERABLE

THE carriage stopped before a house of mediocre appearance, in a quiet and deserted street.

You all know those houses of the last century, which have not been touched since their construction, and which are slowly falling to ruin through the avarice of the proprietor.

The gray walls, molded by rain, and dotted here and there with large patches of yellow moss, resembled the trunk of an old ash tree; the lower part was as green as a swamp in the spring, and a special collection of plants might have been made from the weeds that grew there.

The slate on the roof had lost its color; and the wood of the door, in the last stages of decay, seemed ready to fly into splinters at the least stroke of the hammer. False windows, formerly daubed with patches of black to simulate the panes, and the paint of which had trickled from the second to the first story, showed that an unsuccessful attempt had been made to attain symmetry, at the time the house was built.

The groom lowered the steps and gave the door a magisterial knock that threatened to wreck it. The startled janitress thrust her head through the broken pane that served as both observatory and transom. Her head resembled both that of the buffalo and the wild boar; her fiery red nose, shaped like the stopper of a decanter, was covered with shining blotches and warts, on each of which stood three or four bristling hairs; her cheeks, streaked with red veins and marbled with yellow patches resembled two vine leaves withered by the frosts of autumn; a small bright eye shivered in its orbit like a candle in the depths of a cave; a single tusk of doubtful ivory raised the corner of the upper lip like the defensive arm of the wild boar, and completed the charm of this physiognomy; the strings of her cap hung loose, like the ears of an elephant, on each side of her lank jaws, making an appropriate frame for the whole.

Musidora was almost frightened at the sight of this grotesque Medusa, who stared at her with two eyes of dirty gray, scintillating with inquisitiveness.

"Is M. V—— at home?" asked Arabelle.

"Certainly, madame; the poor man never goes out, except to give a lesson; he is a great scholar, and makes no more noise in the house than a mouse. At the back of the court-yard, the left stairway, the second floor, the door with the stag's hoof—you can't mistake it."

Musidora and Arabelle crossed the court-yard, holding up their dresses as if walking through a prairie wet with dew; for the rank grass throve as well between the cobble-stones as in the open country.

Seeing their hesitation, the odious

hag came out of her lodge, and advanced toward them, dragging her foot after her like a wounded mower.

"This way, ladies, this way! the middle walk. This is not one of those houses like republics, where people are always going in and out. It isn't more than six weeks since I scraped that pavement until my poor fingers were worn to the bone. Are you any relation to M. V——?"

Musidora shook her head negatively.

"I ask because I heard him say that he expected relatives from the country."

They had now reached M. V——'s door, and as neither Musidora nor Arabelle made any reply, this clammy and slimy animal caught hold of the banister and slid down the stairway, grumbling, relying on the discretion of Mademoiselle Cesarine, the professor's housekeeper, for more ample information.

Arabelle pulled the bell.

A dismal kling-klang resounded in the mysterious depths of the apartments; two or three doors opened and closed in the distance; a short, dry cough was heard, and a noise of heavy footsteps approached the door. Then for a few seconds there was a sound of keys and chains, of rattling bolts and padlocks; then the door opened slightly, and gave passage to the sharp and inquisitive nose of Mademoiselle Cesarine, a beauty beyond age, who had failed to reckon the years for a long time.

At the sight of the two young women her face suddenly assumed a crabbed expression, tempered somewhat by the respect inspired by the glitter of the gold chain around Arabelle's neck.

The old spinster opened the door wide and ushered the two pretty women into the ante-chamber, which also served as a dining-room. It was hung in faded green paper, ornamented with framed pictures representing the four seasons, and a barometer wrapped in netting to preserve it from the flies. A white china stove, a walnut table, and a few straw-bottomed chairs composed the entire furnishings. A circular piece of oil-cloth was placed before each chair to save the red paint of the floor, and a simple strip of carpet stretched from one door to the other, also with the intention of preserving the precious coat of Prussian ochre, so carefully scrubbed and waxed by Mademoiselle Cesarine.

Cesarine cautioned the two young women to walk on the strip of carpet—a recommendation which brought a smile to Musidora's lips, for she was in much greater fear of soiling her shoes than of staining the floor.

The second room was a parlor hung in yellow, with velvet furniture of the same color, the worn backs and seats of which attested long and faithful service. The mantel-piece was ornamented with bisque busts of Voltaire and Rousseau, a pair of brass candlesticks, and a clock representing Time killing Love—or Love killing Time—I know not which.

An oil portrait of M. V——, and that of his departed wife, in the full dress of 1810, made of the parlor the most splendid room of the apartments. Cesarine, awed by so much magnificence, never traversed it without a certain interior respect, although long since familiarized with its splendors.

She begged the visitors to have the kindness to wait a few moments while she announced them to monsieur, who was locked in his study, buried in deep scientific researches.

He was standing before the chimney in the attitude of the most vehement contemplation, holding between his thumb and index-finger a crust, which he crumbled into a crystal globe, filled with clear diamond water, in which played three gold-fishes. The bottom of the globe was covered with sand and shells.

A ray of sunshine traversed this crystal globe, which the movements of the three fishes tinted with shades as bright and changing as the colors of the prism. It was really a beautiful spectacle, and a colorist would not have disdained the study of these playful lights and glittering reflections; but M. V—— paid no attention to the gold, silver, and purple with which the wiggling fishes colored their diaphanous prison.

"Cesarine," said he, in a serious and solemn tone, "the big red one is too voracious; he swallows everything, and leaves nothing for the rest; we shall have to put him in a globe by himself."

It was in these grave occupations that M. V——, professor of Chinese and Mantchou, regularly spent three hours each day, carefully locked in his study, as if commenting on the precepts of wisdom of the celebrated Kong-fou-Tsée, or the Treatise on the Culture of Silk-worms.

"This is no time to think of your gold-fish and their quarrels," said Cesarine dryly; "there are two ladies in the parlor who wish to speak to you."

"To me! two ladies, Cesarine?" cried the astonished professor, raising one hand to his wig, and with the other grasping his trousers, which, owing to his negligent attire, allowed his shirt to appear between the belt and the vest. "Two ladies, young and pretty? I am hardly presentable. Cesarine, bring me my dressing-gown. They are no doubt duchesses who have read my Treatise on the Punctuation of Mantchou, and have fallen in love with me."

Trembling with haste and excitement, he thrust his long arms into the capacious sleeves of his dressing-gown, and entered the parlor.

On seeing Arabelle and Musidora the old savant was completely dazzled; and pulling his wig over his eyes, he made three low bows with all the grace at his command.

"Monsieur," said Musidora, "your learning is renowned through France, and indeed through all Europe."

"You are very kind, mademoiselle," said the professor, flushing with pleasure at the compliment.

"It is said," continued Arabelle, "that there is no one in the world so well versed in the knowledge of Oriental languages, and who reads so readily their mysterious hieroglyphics, the knowledge of which is restricted to the most learned."

"Without flattering myself, I may say that I know as much Chinese as any man in France. Has madame read my Treatise on the Punctuation of Mantchou?"

"No," answered Arabelle.

"And you, Mademoiselle?" continued the professor, turning to Musidora.

"I have glanced over it," she replied, suppressing her mirth with difficulty. "It is a very learned work, and does honor to the century that has produced it."

"Then you agree with me on the

position of the tonic accent?" rejoined the old man, swelling with pride.

"Entirely," replied Musidora; "but this is not what brought us here."

"Ah! indeed; what can I do for you, ladies? I would do anything in the world to oblige such charming persons."

"Monsieur," said Musidora, drawing the pocketbook from under her mantle, "if it is not abusing your kindness and knowledge, we would like to have the translation of these two papers."

The professor took the two sheets which Musidora handed him, and observed wisely:

"This is real Chinese paper, and that genuine parchment."

He then placed a majestic pair of spectacles on his venerable nose; but he could not decipher a single word. He made energetic efforts, without, however, making any progress in his reading.

"My dear ladies, I am deeply grieved," he said, as he handed the papers back to Musidora; "but that interwoven writing is truly undecipherable. All I can tell you is that these characters are Chinese, and traced by a well-trained hand. As you are aware, there are forty thousand characters in the Chinese alphabet, each representing a word; although I have studied all my life, I have only learned the first twenty thousand. It takes a native forty years to learn to read. The ideas contained in this letter are no doubt expressed by the characters I have not learned, and which belong to the other twenty thousand. As to the other paper, it is written in Hindoostanee. M. C—— will translate it for you at first sight."

Musidora and her friend retired, very much disappointed. Their visit to M. C—— was also useless, for the excellent reason that M. C—— had not learned any language but the Eskuara, which he taught to an innocent German who was his only pupil.

The only Chinese M. V—— was possessed of was a screen and two cups; but he could speak the dialect of Lower Brittany fluently, and was very successful in the culture of gold-fish.

In fact, these two gentlemen were two very honest men who had had the happy idea of inventing a language to teach it at the expense of the government.

As they were crossing a square, Arabelle noticed some Indian jugglers who were exercising the tricks of their trade—throwing balls of copper in the air, swallowing swords thirty inches long, and chewing hemp, which they emitted in flames through their nostrils, like the fabulous dragons.

"Musidora," said Arabelle, "tell your groom to call one of those rogues; he may know more of Hindoostanee than the professors of the College of France."

On the invitation of the groom, one of the jugglers approached the carriage, turning on his hands and feet like a wheel.

"Here, you rogue," said Arabelle, "I will give you a louis if you can read this paper, which is in Hindoostanee."

"Excuse me, madame; I am a Norman, and Indian by trade only, and I have never learned to read any language."

"Be off with you!" said Musidora, throwing him a five-franc piece.

The false Indian thanked her by executing a wonderful and perilous somersault, to his licorice-stained companions.

As the carriage rolled toward the boulevard, they remarked a young man with a yellow skin, sparkling eyes, straight bluish hair, and all the characteristics of the Asiatic race; he was sitting at the door of a bazaar, thoughtful and melancholy, with a small table before him loaded with a few pounds of dates, half a dozen cocoanuts, and a pair of scales.

It was impossible to imagine anything more sad and dejected than this poor devil curled up under a feeble ray of sunshine. He was no doubt thinking of the green shores of the Hoogly, the grand pagoda of Juggernaut, or the dances of the Bibiadere at the doors of the palaces. He was lost in some inexpressible Oriental reverie, full of reflections of gold, impregnated with strange perfumes, and resounding with joyous laughter, for he started like a man suddenly awakened, when hailed by Musidora's groom.

He came to the carriage with his little shop suspended to his neck, and made a low bow, raising his two hands to his head.

"Read this," said Musidora, handing him the parchment.

The date merchant took the sheet, and with a singularly moved accent read the characters that had baffled the spectacles of the two learned men, while Musidora trembled with anxious curiosity.

"Excuse me, madame," said the merchant, wiping away a tear that overflowed his black eye. "I am the son of a rajah; a series of calamities too long to relate forced me to leave my country and reduced me to my present condition. I have not read or heard a word of my language for six years; this is the first happiness I have experienced for many days. The parchment contains a song in three verses, and is sung to a popular air of our country. This is the meaning of the words:

"Butterflies, white as snow, flying in swarms over the sea, beautiful white butterflies, when can I also take the blue path of the air?"

"Do you know, O beauty of beauties, my bayadere with eyes of jet, if they would but lend me their wings, say, do you know where I would fly?"

"Without snatching a single kiss from the roses, through valleys and forests I would fly, to your half-closed lips, flower of my soul, and there I would die."

Musidora gave him her purse, and he kissed her hand with profound adoration.

"I will return to my country. May Bramah watch over you and shower his blessings on your head," cried the delighted rajah.

Musidora left Arabelle at her door, and returned home no wiser than she had left it, her brain excited by the most irritating curiosity, her heart troubled by the awakening of a sincere passion. She had no means left to trace Fortunio. George, who seemed to know more about him than anybody else, was as dumb as Harpocrate, the god of silence, and besides, he could not be expected to assist Musidora in winning his horses.

Fortunio, Fortunio! have you then the ring of Gyges, which renders invisible at will?

CHAPTER VIII

A LETTER

THE next day a letter, sealed with a sort of Arabian talisman, was brought to Musidora. The strange, singular handwriting, with its slants and complicated flourishes, was unknown to her. She hastily broke the seal, and read the following:

"MY GRACEFUL LITTLE DEMON: You relieved me of my pocket-book with admirable skill, and it does honor to your talents. I regret, my dear angel, that it did not contain a few thousand franc notes to reward you for the trouble you must have had opening it. Your curiosity cannot have been very much satisfied; but then I could not foresee that you would smuggle my pocket-book — one cannot think of everything. Had I known it, I would have filled it abundantly with confidential letters, love epistles, documents, visiting-cards, and other scraps of information.

"I wish, however, to warn you to be very careful with the gold needle. The point has been dipped in the venomous sap of the euphorbia; the least puncture from it will kill with the rapidity of lightning. This needle is a more terrible weapon than a pistol or a dagger; it never fails.

"P. S. Have the stones removed from the pocket-book; they are of great value: they are topazes, and were given to me by the rajah of Serendib. There are enough to make a bracelet that would not disgrace your lovely little arm. My jeweler is the famous B——. You will be careful not to pay him for the setting.

"I kiss your hands and feet.

"FORTUNIO."

CHAPTER IX

LOVE!

MUSIDORA was lying on a sofa; a pink silk wrapper was gathered in negligent folds around her waist; her dainty feet were bare, and a band of enameled gold encircled each ankle, producing an odd and charming effect.

Musidora's position would have given an artist a delicious subject for a caprice.

Her little head, enframed in her fair hair, rested on a pile of cushions; her tiny feet reposed on another pile almost on a level with her head, and her body described an arc of admirable grace.

She was holding Fortunio's letter in her hand; she had been looking at it attentively for a quarter of an hour, as if the form of the characters and the position of the lines could reveal the secret she was trying to fathom.

Musidora was experiencing an entirely new emotion. She wanted something, and she could not get it. For the first time in her life she encountered an obstacle. Her astonishment was great; she, Musidora, so envied and courted, the queen of the joyous and elegant world, had made formal advances without success! What strange revolution! For a moment she felt an indescribable rage, a vehement hatred against Fortunio, and she came within a hair's-breadth of becoming his mortal enemy.

Fortunio's extreme beauty saved

him. Musidora's anger was not proof against his wonderful perfections. The noble and serene outlines of that handsome face appeased all bad sentiments in the girl's heart, and she began to love him with a violence which she did not suspect.

If curiosity had not fanned this love like a breath that passes over a half-lighted brazier, it might have died out with the last fumes of the orgie. Success would have been followed by satiety; but with the obstacle, the spark became a conflagration.

Musidora had now but one thought: to find Fortunio, and make him love her. To this idea a secret jealousy was added. To whom did that tress of hair belong? What hand had given that flower so long preserved? For whom were those verses written?

"Why should I trouble myself?" she exclaimed aloud. "It is three years since Fortunio returned from India."

Then a sudden thought flashed through her mind; she rang, and Jacinthe appeared.

"Jacinthe," she said, "take those stones off the pocket-book, and carry them to B——, the jeweler, in the name of the Marquis Fortunio. Tell him to set them in a bracelet, and try to make him talk about the marquis. I will give you that pearl-gray dress you admire so much."

Jacinthe returned, looking very dismal.

"Well?" said Musidora, raising her head.

"The jeweler says that M. le Marquis Fortunio often comes to his shop to have some stones set; he returns for them himself on the day fixed, always pays cash, and that he is, moreover, an excellent lapidary, and knows more about jewels than he does himself. He knew nothing more. May I have the gray dress?" she concluded anxiously, alarmed by the poor success of her diplomacy.

"Yes; and don't break my head with your chatter; leave me!"

Musidora then returned to the study of the letter. She found an inexpressible pleasure in contemplating the capricious signs traced by Fortunio's hand. She imagined she detected in this note, written to warn her of a danger, a disguised love and a secret need of thinking of her; perhaps the poisoned needle was a mere pretext.

This idea flattered her vanity, but she soon realized that this hope was but an illusion, knowing that if Fortunio felt the least interest in her, he had no need of resorting to this subterfuge. She had shown her emotion too clearly for a man like Fortunio to mistake it. He had repelled her advances with unimaginable politeness. She could not explain this coldness in so young a man, whose eyes blazed with such magnetic splendor. Some ideal, poetic love must fill his heart, soaring far above all vulgar loves, and all the forces of his soul must be concentrated in a unique and profound sentiment; else he would have been won by charms that would have reanimated the ashes of Nestor and Priam in their tombs, and even melted the snows of Hippolyte himself.

"Ah!" sighed Musidora; "he despises me—thinks me unworthy of him!" And she cast a long and somber glance over her past. The gold fibers in her green pupils seemed to writhe like serpents; her velvety brows contracted, her nostrils dilated, and she bit her under lip with her little teeth.

"How do I know what they may have told him? That stupid, drunken George, whose only talent is to convert full bottles into empty ones, has not failed to say with his hateful snicker: 'Ha, ha! hi, hi! the Musidora is a delicious, incomparable girl; she is the pearl of our supper, the light of all fêtes, the flower of all balls; she is very fashionable; upon my word! you would do well to take her. It is good form to show her off at the opera, or at the races. Musidora is a power, an authority on all matters of elegance. If she took a fancy to a provincial in cotton gloves and laced shoes, the laced shoes would replace patent leathers—the very next day everybody would order a pair like them.' I can just hear him from here, and I am sure I am not mistaken in a single word. And that other imbecile, Alfred, whose sleeves hold his arms in place, and who is always lost in his necktie, did not fail to make some stupid joke about me! And de Marcilly—and all of them! I wish I could crush them under my feet and spit my scorn into their faces, for they have made me what I am. Perhaps they have even told Fortunio of that stupid wager! If the dapple grays had only wit enough to take the bits in their teeth, and break George's neck in some ditch! But it is useless to be angry with George. Fortunio needed none of his indiscretions to guess what I am. George is right; I am a delicious, incomparable girl. No! I am an honest woman—I love!"

She arose, kissed Fortunio's letter, placed it near her heart, and ordered her servants to admit no one.

Chapter X

DISCOVERY

The lions and tigers of the menagerie were beginning to feel anxious about Musidora.

They knew not what to think; no one had seen her. Alfred, who seemed to have the gift of being everywhere at once, had not met her for two weeks. The dogs had completely lost the scent, although they passed each day on the boulevards with their noses to the ground in search of a trace. They had given a ball, a concert, and a first representation, but she had not come. No one had even caught a glimpse of the shadow of her dress.

Could she have gone to the country? The time had not yet come. De Marcilly asserted that she was making love to some traveling salesman in an attic. George declared that she must have been abducted by the Turkish Ambassador. Alfred simply remarked that it was strange, very strange, exceedingly strange—a consecrated phrase he used whenever at a loss to know what to say.

But the fact remained that Musidora had not been seen for two weeks.

Her house appeared deserted; the blinds were carefully closed. No one had been seen going in or coming out but a discreet footman, who appeared now and then, gliding swiftly through the half-opened door, which immediately closed behind him. At night the windows, usually blazing with lights, remained dark. A faint star, almost concealed by the thick curtains and gleaming sadly through the corner of a pane, was the only sign of life seen on the somber walls of the house.

"By Jove! I must find out what has become of Musidora," exclaimed George one evening as he was coming out of the opera. "And may I be seen in the Bois de Boulogne in a hired hack, wear greased boots, or do any other humiliating thing, if I do not unearth her!"

And he immediately turned in the direction of Musidora's house.

The footman having received the most formal orders to allow no one to enter, tried to oppose his passage.

"Oh! indeed, you rogue; do you take me for the Baron de B——?" roared George, striking him in the face with his cane, and continuing his way deliberately.

He reached the first parlor without further hindrance, where he kissed Jacinthe, and turning the knob of a small door, entered Musidora's room.

He stopped on the threshold, and looked around for Musidora. The room was almost in darkness, being illuminated only by the little Etruscan lamp, which shed but a pale, subdued light.

When his eyes had grown accustomed to the semi-darkness, he perceived Musidora lying prone on the floor, her head resting on her hand, in an attitude that recalled the Magdalen of Corregio; her disordered hair fell around her, and made a fitting frame for her melancholy face. Had it not been that she was beating the floor with her little foot, she might have been taken for a statue.

"Musidora!" said George, in a paternal tone of reproach, "your conduct is outrageous, scandalous, and exorbitant! The strangest and most ridiculous stories are told about you. If you are not careful you will be horribly compromised, and lose your reputation—"

"Ah! it is you, George!" interrupted Musidora, as if aroused from a dream.

"Yes, my child, it is your sincere and faithful friend, the sworn admirer of your charms, your knight and troubadour, your neglected Romeo!"

"George, you have found the means of becoming more intoxicated than usual; how did you manage it?"

"My dear Musidora, I am solemnly serious. Alas! wine intoxicates me no longer. But that is not the question. It is said, my dear, and I hardly dare repeat it, that you are seriously in love—in love like a chambermaid or a laundress."

"Do they really say that?" asked Musidora, brushing back her wavy hair.

"It is said that you have become pious, that you are acting the rôle of a modern Magdalen, and a thousand other absurd stories are going the rounds! But what is true, is that we scarcely know what to do with ourselves since the light of your countenance has disappeared from our sky. Musidora, we miss you terribly; I feel as lonesome as a patriarch! and the other day, to amuse myself, I was reduced to quarrel with Bepp, whom I had the awkwardness to kill, so that now I have no one skillful enough to play chess with me. It is your fault if I killed my English mare at the steeplechase at Bievre; for I thought I saw you in a carriage the other side of the wall, and made poor mistress Bell jump over, and tore open her belly on a pile of broken bottles. Alfred, who has dropped Cinthie to become one of your admirers, is so demoralized by your disappearance that he was seen at the Tuileries wearing soiled gloves and the same cane he had carried the previous day. Such is the brief but touching recital of the innumerable calamities caused by your reclusion. You are too beautiful, my little one, to cloister yourself in this manner. Beauty, like the sun, should shine for all. There are so few beautiful women, that the government should compel all persons accused and convicted of notorious beauty to show themselves at least three times a week on a balcony, that the people may not lose all sentiment of perfection of form and elegance. This would be much better than spreading stereotyped Bibles among the poor, and founding schools on the Lancastrian method; indeed, I wonder what the government is thinking of! Do you know, my little queen, that since you are not there to dart your sarcastic arrows, we are dressed like a poor devil who has suddenly fallen heir to a fortune, or received an invitation in the morning for a ball that very night, and purchased his clothes ready-made in a shop of the Palais Royal! Do you not see that my vest is fully an inch too large for me, and that the right end of my necktie is longer than the left?—evident signs of great moral perturbation."

"I am extremely touched by your profound grief," said Musidora with a faint smile, "and really I did not think I produced so great a void in disappearing from the world. But I need solitude; the least noise overcomes me; everything bores and wearies me."

"Ah! I understand," retorted George; "you want to see if my new coat fits as well behind as in front. I am importunate, and if anybody was expected, it was certainly not me. But I shall be uncivil for this time, and will not use the only means of being agreeable to you I possess, and which consists in going away."

As he said this he quietly seated himself on the floor beside Musidora.

"By Jove! you have a pretty bracelet!" he said raising her arm.

"Fie! George," cried Musidora with a disdainful pout; "are you reduced to Tartuffe's expedients? and do you need to speak of my bracelet to touch my arm?"

"They are stones of the purest water," continued George, "and E—— made the setting; he has no equal. Who is the Amadis, the Prince Galaor, the charming conqueror, who gave you this? He must be very jealous to keep you under lock and key, like the favorite odalisque of the Turkish sultan?"

"Fortunio gave it to me," replied Musidora.

"Ah! Fortunio! When shall I send you the dapple grays? I am no longer astonished at your disappearance; and you have made good use of your time. You asked for six weeks, and it took you but two to penetrate a mystery that has baffled our united sagacity for three years. Well done! I will throw in a powdered coachman and two grooms over the bargain. I hope you will conduct us to the lair of this cunning fox in the caleche you have so skillfully won."

"I have not seen Fortunio since the night of the supper," said Musidora with a sigh; "I have no idea of his whereabouts. I do not even know if he is in France. These stones were on the pocket-book I stole from him; it contained nothing but a Chinese letter and a Hindoostanee song. Fortunio discovered that I had stolen it, and wrote a sarcastic letter, telling me to have the stones made into a bracelet. That is all. I have heard nothing from him since; he has perhaps gone back to his Chinese princess."

"Oh, no; I saw him twice in the Bois de Boulogne—once in the Madrid road, and the other time at the Porte Maillot. He was mounted on the most savage-looking devil imaginable, that flew like a cannon-ball. I was riding mistress Bell, and you know how she went. But, bah! beside Fortunio's hippogriff she looked—for all that concerns the poor beast must be expressed in the past—like a snail crawling over a stone covered with molasses. Behind him rode a little saffron-colored monster, with eyes larger than his head, enormous lips, stiff hair, and rigged up in the most fantastic dress in the world—a nightmare astride of the wind, for nothing but the wind could travel at that rate. That is all I saw of him. After all, as you say, he may be in China."

Through all this chattering, Musidora seized one idea—Fortunio might be met at the Bois de Boulogne. A ray of hope illuminated her green eyes, and she began to talk more amiably.

"I will give you a month longer," said George, as he arose and kissed her hand. "In other days," he added, "I might have kissed your lips, but I see that you are becoming a girl of principles. Good-night, my little princess; may your dreams be rosy and studded with pearls. If I can catch Fortunio, though it cost me four horses, I swear I will send him to you."

And on this fine peroration George passed out of the room, not forgetting to kiss Jacinthe before leaving the house, and spent the rest of the night we know not where.

Chapter XI

WISELY RESOLVED

Musidora awoke in a happier frame of mind the next morning. She had a mirror brought to her in her bed, and found herself looking very pretty—a little pale, eyes somewhat heavy, just enough to make her beauty appear more delicate and interesting.

"If Fortunio saw me like this," she thought, "I would be sure of victory."

She was indeed irresistible. But how was she to conquer a flying enemy who would not fight?

The weather was beautiful for the season; a few lozenge-shaped patches of azure peeped through the jagged edges of the clouds, and a fresh breeze had dried the roads. Although Musidora was usually indifferent to the variations of the temperature, and never had occasion to be anxious about rain or sunshine, she now felt a great delight as she looked at the serenity of the sky.

She ran through the house with extraordinary animation, consulting every clock, and anxiously watching the weather-cocks on the neighboring roofs.

Her faithful maid Jacinthe assisted her in donning an elegant blue riding habit, pretty gaiters, beaver hat, green veil, and handed her the light whip that completed the outfit.

Thus equipped, Musidora had a little deliberate air of triumph that became her charmingly. Her clusters of wavy hair formed a graceful frame for her cheeks; her waist, inclosed in the tight-fitting habit, arose, supple and slender, above the rich, ample folds of the skirt; her foot, naturally so small, became almost imperceptible when imprisoned in the narrow buskin.

Jack announced that madame's mare was saddled and bridled.

Musidora hurried down the courtyard, and with Jack's assistance, leaped lightly into the saddle; and giving the mare a smart cut on the shoulder, was off like the wind.

Jack, who was galloping behind, found it difficult to keep up.

They soon reached the end of the Avenue des Champs Elysees. The mare had not been out for a long time, and bounded with impatience, like a grasshopper. Although going at full gallop, her mistress gave her loose rein, and did not spare the whip. I know not what presentiment whispered to Musidora that she would see Fortunio that day.

The mare, thus urged, lengthened her pace, and seemed to fly.

The passers-by and promenaders stood still, amazed at the daring of the young woman; now and then a cry of terror came from a carriage containing a frightened duchess, who closed her eyes, fearing to see the imprudent rider fall and dash out her brains on the pavement.

But Musidora was an excellent rider, and kept her seat as if soldered or screwed to it.

At the Porte Maillot she met Alfred, who was returning to Paris. The surprised fop tried to turn his horse to follow and overtake her, that he might pour forth his passion and relieve his heart. But he executed the movement so clumsily that he slipped out of his stirrups, and before he could regain his seat, Musidora was out of sight.

"The devil!" he muttered, bringing his horse back to a walk; "what a fine opportunity I have missed. I shall wait here, and she will probably return by the same gate."

Fearing to miss her, Alfred mounted guard at the Porte Maillot, where he stood as motionless as a sentinel on duty before the Arc de Triomphe of the Carousel.

The forest was still leafless, and only a few blades of green grass were to be seen through the remnants of decayed foliage; the red, sappy branches spread out like the denuded frame of an umbrella, or a fan without its silk covering. Although there was no sun, the roads were as dusty as on a hot summer day. The bois was indeed as hideous as a fashionable park can be, which is saying a good deal.

But Musidora was not a lover of rustic scenes, and she had not come to the bois to admire nature. She wandered through every path, haunted the Madrid drive for several hours, but all in vain; there was no trace of Fortunio.

"What ails Musidora to-day?" said the young men, who saw her tear along at breakneck speed, like a shadow carried by the wind, and jumping over every obstacle at the risk of her life.

"Is she training for a circus-rider or a jockey? What sudden craze has taken possession of her?"

Suddenly Musidora thought she saw Fortunio at a turn of an avenue, and she rushed in pursuit, using spurs and whip unsparingly.

The frenzied mare reared, pawed the

air, and started off as if pursued by a specter. The veins stood out on her muscular neck, her flanks heaved noisily, the foam dropped from her bridle, and her speed was so great that her tail and mane stood out horizontally.

"Musidora!" cried George, who was coming from a contrary direction, "you will founder your mare!"

The girl paid no heed, and continued her mad gallop.

She was charming. The excitement of the chase had flushed her cheeks and brightened her eyes; her loosened hair floated behind her, her lips were tightly closed, and she breathed through her nostrils to avoid being choked by the wind, and her streaming veil gave her an aerial and transparent appearance. The two fair warriors, Bradmante and Marphise, never looked more proud and resolute on their fiery steeds.

Alas! it was not Fortunio; it was merely a good-looking young fellow, who was not a little astonished to see a young woman tearing down upon him at full gallop, and then turning away suddenly without a word.

The disappointed Musidora again met George, who was jogging along slowly, like a country priest on a donkey.

"George," she said, "escort me home; I have lost my groom."

George turned his horse, and they returned to Paris through the Anteuil gate.

"Look!" said de Marcilly to his companion; "George has gone back to Musidora."

"I don't believe he ever dropped her entirely," replied his friend.

"I will not fail to tell the Duchess de M——," rejoined de Marcilly; "she will give him a fine lecture. What transcendent pathos he will have to resort to before he can reinstate himself into her good graces."

As to Alfred, whose nose was sensibly affected by the evening breeze, he remained at his post until the shades of night enveloped the bois, and finally reached this judicious conclusion—which he should have come to two hours sooner:

"Ah!" he muttered, "she must have gone through another gate. This little girl is decidedly too capricious. I will go back to Phebe. She has a much pleasanter character."

Having formed this wise resolution, he drove his spurs into his horse, and rode to the Cafe de Paris, where he consoled himself for his discomfiture by getting comfortably drunk.

Chapter XII

FIRST TEARS

Musidora reached home worn out by fatigue, almost discouraged, and sadder than a professional gambler whose best friend has refused the loan of twenty francs as a stake.

She threw herself on the lounge, and wept bitterly, while Jacinthe removed her buskins and unclasped her dress. These were the first tears that had ever dimmed those bright eyes, with their clear, cold glance, sharp and cutting as a dagger. The death of her mother had not brought a single tear to her eyes. It is true that her mother had sold her to an old English lord at the age of thirteen, and has often beaten her to make her give up her money; and these trifles had somewhat moderated the ardors of Musidora's filial affection. She had looked on the corpse of young Willis, who had blown out his brains in despair because he could not satisfy all her caprices, without showing the least emotion. And she now wept because she had not met Fortunio.

Her icy heart, more barren and cold than a Siberian winter, had at last melted under love's warm breath, and resolved itself into a soft rain of tears. These tears were the baptism of her new life.

There are natures of diamond; with its cold brilliancy and invincible hardness; nothing affects them, no fire can melt them, no acid can dissolve them; they resist all friction, and with their sharp angles tear the weak and tender souls they meet on the way. The world accuses them of cruelty and barbarism; they merely obey an inexorable law which wills that when two bodies come in contact, the harder will wear out and devour the softer. Why does the diamond cut the glass, and the glass not the diamond? That is the question. Can we accuse the diamond of insensibility?

Musidora was one of those natures. She had lived calm and indifferent in the midst of disorder; she had plunged into infamy like the diver under his bell who sees the terrible polypus and the hungry sharks circling around and unable to reach him. Her real existence was entirely separate from her inner thoughts, and was a thing apart from her. It often seemed to her that another woman, who, by strange hazard, had her name and figure, was doing all that was attributed to her.

But when such a nature comes in contact with a soul of equal strength and resistance, the angles suddenly disappear, the facets form, and it becomes indelibly engraved. Diamond alone can cut diamond.

Fortunio had succeeded in piercing Musidora's strong armor, and had engraved his image on that metal insensible to acid and fire.

He had drawn a woman from the statue, as the young herdsman of fabulous antiquity, endowed by Venus with irresistible beauty, had drawn from the heart of a hard and knotty oak a smiling nymph in all the splendor of her beauty.

Musidora felt a new soul expanding within her, like a mysterious flower sown by Fortunio on the barren rock of her heart. Her love had all the divine puerilities, all the childish adoration of a pure and virginal passion. Musidora has been transformed into a young, innocent girl, who blushes at a word and trembles under a too ardent gaze. She carried Fortunio's letter next to her heart, slept with it, kissed it twenty times a day, and did all this in all sincerity. You may believe me when I say that if it had not been too early for daisies, she would have plucked the leaves, saying, "A little, much, not at all," like the innocent Marguerite in Dame Martha's garden.

Who has dared say that there existed a certain Musidora, proud, haughty, capricious, depraved, venomous as a scorpion—so wicked, in fact, that one expected to see the cloven hoof peeping from under her skirts—a Musidora without soul, without mercy, without remorse, who deceived even the lover of her choice—a vampire of gold and silver, swallowing fortunes as she would a glass of soda for an appetizer—a mocking demon, scorning everything with a harsh and discordant laugh? They who have said all this are certainly mistaken.

We have no knowledge of such a Musidora, and we doubt her existence. Besides, we would not have taken such an abominable creature for our heroine. And then, one should never believe rumors; men are so malicious that they even found means to slander Tiberius and Nero.

The Musidora we know is sweeter and whiter than milk, and as innocent as a four-weeks-old lamb; the odor of early strawberries is less sweet and fresh than the perfume of her newly expanded soul. Her young dreams wander innocently over green fields and along blooming hawthorn hedges. Her only desire is to inhabit a humble cottage beside a rippling brook, and live there in eternal bliss with her beloved.

What fifteen-year-old girl, sheltered by the maternal skirts, could dream of a happiness more chaste and simple?—a simple heart, without India shawls, milky horses, rich jewels, and opera-boxes.

O sancta simplicitas! as said John Huss, when they bound him to the stake.

However, this dream, in appearance so simple and easy to realize, seems far from being accomplished.

Shall we have the happiness of meeting Fortunio at the Bois de Boulogne? The chance is doubtful. And yet we have no other means of continuing our novel. The Italian birds have flown from their gilded cage; so we cannot make Fortunio and Musidora meet at a representation of "Anna Bolena" or of "Don Juan." As to the opera, Fortunio rarely goes there, and we cannot think of changing our dear hero's habits. In the meantime we are furnishing Havanas to a young friend of ours who is encamped on the boulevard at Ghent watching for Fortunio, for he sometimes goes there with his friend de Marcilly.

We did think of sending Musidora back to the Madrid drive, where she would have seen Fortunio galloping at full speed; she would have rushed wildly in pursuit, her mare been frightened by a branch, and been thrown violently to the ground. Fortunio would have picked her up in a swoon and taken her home; he would then have been obliged to call frequently to see if she were improving. Then would have followed an avowal from Musidora, the melting of Fortunio's heart, etc., etc. But these means are entirely worn out; novels are full of such episodes—women pursued by furious bulls, carriages stopped on the brink of precipices, runaway horses stopped by unknown heroes, and other beautiful inventions of the kind.

Moreover, when one is thrown from a horse, it is only natural to have a shoulder put out of joint, a broken skull, a few teeth broken, or a nose crushed; and we have taken too much pains to make a pretty creature of Musidora to thus endanger her beautiful shoulders, delicate nose, or pearly teeth, white as those of a Newfoundland dog, in favor of which we have exhausted all we knew in the way of limpid comparisons. Do you think it would be pleasant to see her silky blonde hair lying stiff and matted with coagulated blood? We might even be obliged to cut it off to dress the wound; our heroine would then have a shaved head. We could never allow such a monstrous thing! Besides, it would be impossible for us to continue a story with the head of the heroine dressed a la Titus.

What would be more odious than a princess of romance who resembled a little boy?

We have undertaken a difficult task.

How are we to know what Fortunio is doing? There is really no reason why we should be better informed than you. We saw Fortunio but once—at a supper—and the unhappy idea entered our head to take him for our hero, convinced that a young man of such distinguished appearance could not fail to furnish us with many romantic adventures. The hearty welcome he received from everybody, the mysterious interest he inspired in all, the few strange words he uttered between a smile and a toast, prepossessed us strangely in his favor.

Ah! Fortunio, how you have deceived us! We expected to have nothing to do but write, under your dictation, a marvelous history, full of surprising incidents. On the contrary, we are obliged to draw on our own funds and strain our imagination to keep our readers from becoming impatient, until it pleases you to present yourself and make your courtesy. We have made you handsome, intelligent, generous, wealthy, mysterious, noble, and well-dressed—rare and precious gifts! Had you had a fairy god-mother, you could not have been better endowed; and how many pages have you given us for all this, ungrateful Fortunio? A dozen at the most. O Hyrcanian ferocity! O unheard-of monstrosity! Twelve pages for twenty-four perfections!—it is not much.

You indolent fellow! We were obliged to reduce Musidora to despair, to make George drink like a regiment of dragoons, to make Alfred utter a greater number of stupidities than usual, to make Cinthie show her shoulders and arms, and Arabelle her dresses, to fill the space you should have occupied alone. If we have committed the imprudence of introducing the reader into Musidora's bath-room, it is your fault; we did not know what else to do. You have forced us to lengthen our description, and violate the precept of Horace, *Semper ad eventum festina.* If our novel is bad, the fault is yours—may you be forgiven! We have used our best orthography and looked up the dictionary for our words we were not sure of. You, our hero, should have furnished us with incredible events, great Platonic passions and others, duels, abductions, and dagger-thrusts; it was on that condition that we invested you with so many qualities. If you keep on thus, dear Fortunio, we shall declare that you are ugly, stupid, vulgar, and penniless. We cannot stand on the corner to watch for you, like a discarded mistress, on a stormy night, awaiting her unfaithful lover to grasp him by the tails of his coat. If you had a janitor, we would get your story from him; but you have none, since you have no house, and consequently no door. O Calliope! muse of eloquence, sustain our breath! What can we say in our next chapter? The only thing we can do is to kill Musidora. Oh! Fortunio, see to what extremity we are reduced! We created a pretty girl for you, and we are forced to kill her on page 109 contrary to all accepted usage, which does not allow us to insert the needle into the bubble, inflated with sighs of love, called the heroine of the romance, until we reach page 310 or 320.

CHAPTER XIII

FORTUNIO'S NOTE

TIME went on, and still Fortunio did not appear.

All Musidora's researches had been in vain; she now recalled Arabelle's words: "Fortunio is a myth, not a man."

In fact, he was handsome enough to be taken for a supernatural vision. The splendor in the midst of which he had appeared to Musidora contributed not a little to this poetic illusion, and sometimes she doubted the reality; like one who, having seen the gates of Heaven ajar for a moment, and then inexorably closed, would naturally believe himself the dupe of a feverish hallucination.

Her friends came with little airs of ironical condolence and faces joyously sad, to offer her perfidious consolations. Cinthie advised her sincerely to take a new lover, as it would give her something to think of. But Musidora replied that, though this remedy might do for Phebe or Arabelle, it did not suit her taste. Cinthie then kissed her affectionately, and withdrew, saying:

"Povera inamorata! I will have a novena made to the Madonna for the success of your love!"

Seeing that all hope was futile, and that Fortunio was undiscoverable, Musidora became disgusted with life, and formed the most sinister projects in her charming head. Like a brave and courageous girl, she resolved not to survive her first love.

"Since I have seen the one I was to love," she said to herself, "I will not be so cowardly as to allow any living man to touch my dress with the tips of his fingers; I will consecrate myself to him! Ah! if I could begin my life over again! if I could blot from it every day that was not consecrated to you, my beloved and mysterious Fortunio! I had a vague presentiment that you existed somewhere, gentle and proud, intelligent and handsome, a light in your calm eyes, an indulgent smile on your divine lips, like an angel descended among men. I saw you, and my whole heart went out to you. By a single glance you won my soul; I felt that I belonged to you; I recognized my conqueror and master; I understood that I could never love anyone but you, and that the tranquillity of life was gone forever. God has punished me for not waiting for you; but now I know that you exist; you are not a phantom, a charming specter, a delusion of my excited brain. I have heard you, seen you, touched you; I have tried to find you to throw myself at your feet, to beg you to forgive me, and love me a little. But you escaped me like a shadow. There is nothing left me but to die; to know that you are not a dream, and live, is an impossibility."

Musidora turned over in her mind a thousand modes of suicide.

First she thought of drowning herself, but the Seine was yellow and muddy; then the thoughts of being fished up by the nets of Saint-Cloud and stretched on the black and slimy slabs of the morgue made her shudder.

For a moment she thought of blowing out her brains; but she had no pistol, and then no woman likes to be disfigured; even after death there is a certain funereal coquetry—one likes to make a presentable corpse.

A dagger thrust in her heart possessed some attraction; but she feared to recoil before the blade, and besides, her hand might not be sure. She wanted to kill herself, not to inflict an interesting wound.

She finally determined on poison.

We can assure our readers that the inelegant and vulgar idea of asphyxiation by charcoal did not once enter her mind; she knew too well how to live to die so badly.

A sudden thought flashed through her brain: Fortunio's needle!

"I shall prick my breast with the needle, and all will be over. My death will possess some sweetness, since it will come from Fortunio," she said, as she drew it from the folds of the pocket-book. She looked attentively at the sharp point, tarnished by a reddish sediment, and laid it on the table by her side.

She then dressed herself in a white muslin wrapper, placed a rose of the same color in her hair, and stretched herself on the sofa, having carefully loosened her dress that she might inflict the wound with more precision.

Musidora had indeed determined to die; but we must admit that she made her preparations slowly, as if some vague and secret hope still withheld her hand.

"I will insert the needle at twelve o'clock," she said—it was precisely a quarter to twelve. We cannot explain the strange caprice, but Musidora would certainly have been much grieved to die at 11:45.

While time dropped the sands of the fatal quarter of an hour in its glass, a thought came to Musidora: Would death from this poison be painful? would it leave a red or black mark on her body? She would have liked to see its effect.

In the days of Cleopatra this difficulty might have been easily overcome. Five or six slaves, male or female, would have been summoned, and the poison tried on them; this would have been merely what doctors call an experiment *in anima vili.*

A dozen wretches would have writhed like eels cut in two on the beautiful pavement of porphyry and sparkling mosaics, while their mistress leaned nonchalantly on the shoulder of a young Asiatic girl, and followed with her velvety eyes the last convulsions of their agony. But the world has degenerated, and the prodigious life of that wonderful age is not understood nowadays; our virtues and crimes are absolutely uninteresting.

Having no slaves on whom to try her needle, Musidora, much perplexed, held it between her fingers three inches from her breast, envying Cleopatra, who had at least seen what she had to suffer from the venomous asp before she could rejoin her beloved Antony.

While Musidora was plunged in this uncertainty, her white cat crawled from under the sofa and came to her mistress, mewing softly. Seeing that her advances were unheeded, she jumped into her lap and touched her hand with her little cold nose.

Blanchette then elevated her back, and looked at her mistress with her round pupils, expressing her anxiety to be caressed by a purring peculiar to cats and tigers.

A diabolical idea came to Musidora as she stroked the cat; she pricked her slightly with the needle.

Blanchette gave a bound, jumped to the floor, made two or three efforts to walk, then fell as if overcome by dizziness, gasping, and feebly beating the floor with her tail; a shiver ran through her body, the eyes lighted up with a green light, then closed. She was dead. All this had lasted but a few seconds.

"Very well," said Musidora; "it cannot be very painful;" and she brought the needle closer to her breast. She was on the point of scratching her white skin when she heard the rumbling of carriage-wheels entering the court-yard at full speed, and she suspended the execution of her fatal project for a moment.

She arose and looked out of the window. A carriage, harnessed to four dappled gray horses, perfectly alike, and so beautifully formed that they looked like Arabian steeds, was entering the court-yard. The postilions wore light green liveries—Musidora's colors—and there was no one in the carriage.

She was wondering what it could mean when Jacinthe brought a note given her by one of the grooms. This is what it contained:

"MADAME: My unsociability has caused you the loss of a carriage, and it is not just. This one is better than George's, and I hope you will deign to accept it. Should you wish to try it, the Neuilly road is very good, and you could test the speed of your horses; I would be happy to meet you there.

"FORTUNIO."

CHAPTER XIV

WHICH OF US?

WE can easily imagine Musidora's delight and amazement; she passed without transition from the depths of despair to intense happiness. The mysterious Fortunio had surrendered himself at the moment when she least expected it. The triumphant trumpet already sounded joyfully in Musidora's ears; for she no longer doubted her victory, and was sure of winning Fortunio's heart.

O bright hope! with what persistency you raise the supple and elastic boughs bent under the leaden foot of disappointment, and how little it takes to make you blossom into marvelous flowers, and shoot your vigorous branches on all sides!

Here is a child who scarcely an hour ago was paler than an alabaster statue lying in her tomb, and whose bluish veins seemed to run through marble rather than under living flesh, and now she is dancing and singing as gayly as a sparrow in the spring.

"Jacinthe! Jacinthe!" she cried; "come quick! dress me, put on my shoes—I am going out."

"What dress will madame wear?" asked Jacinthe deliberately, to give her time for reflection.

"The first you can lay your hand on," she cried impatiently; "but in mercy, be quick! You are slower than a turtle; one would think you had a shell on your back."

The maid brought a white dress, striped with very pale pink, which gave it a flesh color, and made it look like some newly expanded flower.

Musidora dressed hastily, wrapped a large cashmere shawl around her that enveloped her from head to foot, and Jacinthe placed on her head the most charming and deliciously coquettish hat imaginable. We will not attempt a description of this masterpiece in vile prose—imagine a large camellia, with the face of an angel for a heart.

A low slipper, that barely concealed her toes, peeped from under the edge of her dress, and stockings of excessive delicacy revealed the rosy skin of the dainty little foot.

Musidora did not take time to put on her gloves, but rushed down and jumped into the carriage.

"To Neuilly!" she called to the footman, as he closed the door; and the carriage started off like a flash of lightning.

"What is this?" exclaimed Jacinthe, as she stumbled over the dead body of the cat. "Here, Jack! your beast is dead; your mistress will make a nice fuss when she comes home."

The bewildered Jack knelt beside the cat, pulled its tail, pinched its ears, rubbed its nose with a handkerchief dipped in cologne—but alas! all in vain.

"Ah! the wicked beast; she died on purpose to have me whipped by madame," cried the negro, rolling his eyes with comical terror; "and her little hand is mighty hard."

"Shut up, you cur! Do you think madame would degrade herself by touching you? She will have you flogged by Zamore." said Jacinthe majestically; "and to tell the truth, you deserve it. To have nothing but a cat to take care of, and let it die like a dog! Poor little thing!"

"Hola ouf! aie!" cried the little darky, as if he already felt the blows in store for him.

"Oh, you will scream in earnest by and by," continued Jacinthe, enjoying the boy's terror; "you know how Zamore hates you, and he has a good arm. He will skin you alive, like an eel; you may count on it, Master Jack."

Jack picked up the cat, placed it in its cradle, folded the four paws under it, curled its tail around it, and opened the eyes to give it an appearance of life; then hid himself behind a stack of hay in the barn, to await the passing of the storm, having provided himself with a bottle of wine, a good supply of bread, and some cold meat.

While we are on the subject, we must exonerate Musidora from the charge of cruelty in killing her favorite cat. Believing she was to die herself, she feared the animal might be reduced to prowl on the roofs, exposed to the horrors of famine, rain, and snow. She was ferocious merely through kindness. Besides, she had it properly stuffed and placed under a globe, with a red plush cord around it, where it lies on a small cushion of sky-blue silk, and in its enameled eyes is a greenish light, as if it were alive; it almost seems to purr.

Which of us can flatter himself with the thought that he shall be stuffed and placed under a globe after death? Which of us can expect to be regretted like a long-furred cat, or a well-trained dog?

CHAPTER XV

HADJI! HADJI!

THE green-liveried postilions cracked their whips gayly, and the carriage rolled on so rapidly that the wheels resembled sparkling disks.

The dust had not time to fall before the carriage was out of sight. The finest equipages were left far behind, and yet not a drop of perspiration moistened the coats of the horses; their long, bony legs devoured the road that vanished under them like a rolling ribbon.

Lying back on the soft cushions, Musidora abandoned herself to thoughts of love. Her transparent skin was radiant with the flush of happiness, and her little hand resting on the side of the carriage was beating time to some gay air she hummed to herself. Her delight was so great that now and then she broke into spasmodic and almost feverish peals of laughter; she wanted to cry out, to jump from the carriage and run, or do some other vehement action, to give vent to her exuberance and quiet her excitement. Her languor had vanished. She who only the day before had been carried to her bath, and could scarcely raise her foot to climb a single step, could now have accomplished the achievements of Hercules without the least exertion—or very near it.

Curiosity and love, those powerful levers, one of which alone could lift the world, exalted all the powers of her soul to the highest degree; there was not a fiber, not a cord within her that was not strung to its utmost tension, and which did not vibrate like the cord of a lyre.

She would see Fortunio, listen to him, talk to him, feed on his beauty; her soul would cling to his lips, and drink each of those words more precious than the diamonds that fell from the mouths of the virtuous young girls in Perrault's fairy tales. Ah! the ecstasy of breathing the air in which his breath mingled, of being caressed by the same ray of the sun that played on his black hair, of having something in common with him! Ah! what ineffable bliss, what ocean of secret rapture!

At this thought Musidora's heart danced a tarantella within her breast.

The dandies spurred their horses to see the face of the unknown duchess in this marvelous turn-out, and more than one almost lost his equilibrium in the stupefaction of his admiration. Although Musidora would have been flattered at any other time, she paid little heed to them now; she was no longer a coquette.

There was nothing left of the old Musidora but the name and beauty. And even her beauty had been metamorphosed; until then she had been bewitchingly pretty—she was now passionately beautiful.

It may seem improbable that so sudden a change could have taken place, and that so passionate a love should have been enkindled at the first meeting. To this we would say that nothing seems more unlikely than the truth, and that what is false, has always very great appearances of truth; for it is arranged, built up, and combined beforehand to produce the effect of truth: gilt looks more like gold than gold itself.

Moreover, a woman's heart is a labyrinth, so full of turns and obscure corners, that even the great poets, who have ventured to explore it with the golden lamp of genius in their hands, were not always able to find their way, and no one can boast of possessing the guiding thread that leads to the exit of this maze. One may expect anything from a woman, and especially the absurd.

Many respectable men, and ladies who are angry at being so, no doubt consider that love at first sight is a pure romantic illusion, and that one can never love a man or a woman who has been seen but once. But if we cannot love a person the first time, there is no reason why we should love them the second, and still less the third.

Besides, it was necessary that Musidora should fall in love with Fortunio, or else our novel could not have been written. Our hero, gifted as he is, rich, young, handsome, intelligent, and mysterious, deserved, moreover, to be loved at first sight. Many others who have not half his qualities succeed as promptly.

What is there strange in the fact that a young girl should fall in love with a handsome young man? But whether the thing is probable or not, Musidora adored Fortunio, whom she did not know—or whom she had seen but once—which is the same thing.

This dissertation does not prevent the carriage from flying along the grand avenue of the Champs Elysees, and having passed the Arc de l'Etoile, that gigantic door opening into space.

Nature presented an altogether different aspect from the day on which Musidora hunted the bois in search of Fortunio. The somber red of the buds had burst into delicate green leaves—the color of hope; and the birds on the branches were chirping joyful promises; the sky, dotted by two or three clouds of white wadding, seemed like an enormous blue eye looking down lovingly on the earth; the sweet odor of new foliage and fresh grass ascended like a spring incense; little yellow butterflies danced about the flowers and circled in the luminous bands that formed a background to the green forest.

Everything breathed joy and love; the atmosphere was impregnated with youth and happiness. At least, this was Musidora's impression; she saw exterior objects through the prism of love.

Passions are yellow, blue, or red glasses that color everything. A landscape which seemed hideous, wretched, more inhospitable than the steppes of Scythia when seen in a moment of despair, will appear bright, sparkling, glistening with crystal water, covered with soft grass—a real terrestrial paradise—when seen through the lenses of happiness.

Nature resembles those grand symphonies which each person interprets in his own way. One will hear a supreme cry of agony, while another merely hears the warbling of nightingales or the shrill sound of the shepherd's flute.

Musidora interpreted the symphony as an expression of love and happiness.

The carriage still rolled on; the tall trees bowed their heads, flying to the right and left like a routed army. And still Fortunio did not appear.

Musidora's heart filled with anxiety.

What if Fortunio had changed his mind? She re-read his note, and was somewhat reassured.

At last she saw a small cloud of white dust at the end of the avenue that approached rapidly.

Her agitation was so great that she leaned her head back on the cushions; her temples throbbed, her cheeks flushed, her hand drooped, and she dropped the note she had held in such a convulsive grasp.

She was nearing the supreme moment of her life: her fate was to be decided.

Soon the cloud of dust opened like a classic cloud enveloping a divinity, permitting her to see a black horse with arched neck, eyes and nostrils full of fire, resembling a hippogriff rather than an ordinary quadruped. The cavalier mounted on this horse was no other than Fortunio, with the Moor a few paces behind him.

It was indeed he. He had that air of nonchalant security that never left him, and that gave him such ascendancy over everybody. He looked as if no human adversity could reach him, as if he felt far above the reach of fate. And this serenity reigned on his handsome face like a marble mask.

The horse executed marvelous capers as he advanced, now raising his four hoofs in the air, then rearing and taking a few steps on his hind legs.

The noble animal lent himself to these exigencies with wonderful ease and grace; he seemed to vie with his master in feats of daring; they looked like one, and the same will seemed to animate them both, for Fortunio had neither spurs nor whip, and did not even hold the rein. He guided his steed by some imperceptible movement, and it was impossible to see by what means he conveyed his thought to the intelligent animal.

When about fifty paces from the carriage, he started his horse at full speed and stopped within a foot of the steps. Musidora gave a cry of terror, fearing he would dash himself against the wheels; but Fortunio, by a skillful movement familiar to Arabian cavaliers, brought his steed to an abrupt stop, passing without transition from the greatest speed to the immobility of a statue. After a moment he made his horse dance around the carriage, and in the midst of a series of plunges and kicks, he bowed to Musidora with as much grace and ease as if he were standing on the solid floor of a drawing-room.

"Madame," he began, "forgive a poor savage, who during his long wanderings through the Orient has lost the habits and manners of European society, and who scarcely knows how to conduct himself in the presence of ladies. Had I had the presumption to think you desired to see me, I would have gone to you as fast as Tippoo's speed could have carried me; but I never thought that a maniac like myself could interest your curiosity."

We would like to give Musidora's answer, but we have never learned what it was. It is certain, however, that she opened her lips, raised her beautiful eyes to Fortunio, and murmured a few words; but although we strained our ears, we could not catch one syllable. The grinding of sand under the wheels, and the pawing of the horses, probably drowned the almost inaudible words. We regret the fact, for we would have liked to gather the precious words.

"Musidora," resumed Fortunio, in a sweet, sonorous voice, "you have probably heard many strange stories concerning me, for my friends have vivid imaginations. What will you think when you find that, far from being a hero of romance, a strange, wonderful man, I am simply an honest, good fellow, although capricious and fantastic now and then? I assure you, Musidora, that I drink wine at my meals, not liquid gold; I eat more oysters than pearls dissolved in vinegar; I sleep in a bed, and sometimes in a hammock; and I generally walk on my feet, unless I borrow those of Tippoo, Zerline, or Agandacca, my favorite mare. Such is my way of living. I prefer poetry to prose, and music to poetry; and there is nothing I admire as much as a Titian painting, unless it be a beautiful woman. I have no political opinion. I hate no one but my friends, and would feel rather inclined to philanthropy if all men were monkeys. I would willingly believe in God, if he did not so much resemble a churchwarden. And I think the rose more useful than the cabbage. You know me as well now as if you had seen me every day for ten years. This is all the information I can give you concerning myself, for I know nothing more."

"Really," laughed Musidora, "you are too modest. Do you know, Monsieur Fortunio, that you are perfectly eccentric?"

"Not at all; I am the plainest fellow in the world; I merely do what I please, and live for myself only. But the sun is becoming warmer, and your parasol will soon be insufficient to protect you from its rays. If it pleases you to come and rest for a few moments in a hut—a sort of wigwam I have over there—you can return to Paris in the cool hours of twilight."

"Willingly," replied Musidora; "I am curious to see your veranda, or your wigwam as you call it, for they say you have no home—that you roost."

"Sometimes, but not always. I have passed more than one night strapped in a tree with my belt, to keep me from falling and breaking my neck. But here I live like the most commonplace peasant; I only lack the red tile roof and green blinds to be the most Arcadian and sentimental youth in the world."

Then, turning abruptly, he called: "Hadji! Hadji!"

In two bounds the Moor was at his side. Fortunio said a few words to him in a strange tongue with a queer guttural accent, and Hadji started off at full speed.

"Pray excuse me, madame, for using an unknown idiom in your presence, but that rogue understands neither French nor any other Christian tongue."

"I hope you have not sent him to make preparations on my account," said Musidora. "Do you want me to be received by a deputation of young girls in white dresses, and carrying bouquets? No trouble on my account, please."

"I have merely sent him to cage my lion and tigress Betsy. They are charming beasts, gentle as lambs, but their presence might trouble you. My house is like a menagerie; I am as whimsical as an old maid—I cannot live without my animals."

"Are you sure the bars of the cages are solid?" asked Musidora anxiously.

"Oh! perfectly solid," replied Fortunio with a laugh. "But here we are."

Chapter XVI

FRIGHTFUL LUXURY

Fortunio's house had no facade; two terraces with stone angles, a stairway with carved balustrades, and two large blue china vases filled with luxuriant plants, standing on each side of a massive oaken door, which was sculptured and adorned by two medallions of Roman emperors, were all that could be seen. These two terraces formed a sort of bastion that hid the rest from the eyes of the curious.

The carriage dashed up to the gate, which opened as if by enchantment, and they entered a large court-yard, surrounded by a palisade of boxwood carved into arcades. This gave our heroine a chance to examine her surroundings.

At the end of the court-yard stood a building of white stone, cemented with such precision that it looked like one block. Niches, richly carved, and in which stood antique busts, were the only things that relieved the plain surface of the hall, it being entirely devoid of windows. A bronze door, on which fell the shadow of an awning, occupied the center of the edifice; three steps of white marble, between two sphinxes with paws crossed on their breasts, led to the door.

The carriage stopped under the awning. Fortunio alighted, raised the pretty girl in his arms, and deposited her on the first step; he then touched a panel, which disappeared into the wall, and immediately closed behind them.

They now found themselves in a large hall lit from above, with four doors opening into it. The floor was of mosaic, with designs of pigeons perched on the edge of a fountain from which they drank, the whole encircled in festoons of flowers—the real mosaic of Sosimus of Pergama, which antiquarians believe lost.

Large yellow pillars supported delicately carved arches, forming a frame to wax paintings, with antique dancers holding up their light tunics and gracefully waving their arms, white and delicate as the handles of an alabaster vase.

Musidora stopped in admiration.

"Don't stop to look at these daubings," said Fortunio, leading the way into another room. "Admit that you expected something better, Musidora; you must find me a poor Sardanapalus. You have seen nothing worth looking at so far. My Asiatic and Babylonian splendors are of the poorest, and it is as much as ever if I attain the *mediocritas aurea* of Horace. It is a fit dwelling for a hermit."

In fact, the room in which they now stood was of the greatest simplicity. It was encircled by a low divan, and the walls and floor were covered with mats of extreme delicacy and dazzling designs. Blinds of Chinese bamboo covered the stained-glass windows, and from the ceiling hung a crystal globe filled with clear water, in which were swimming blue fishes with golden fins, their perpetual movements filling the room with the brightest and oddest prismatic rays. Under this globe was a small fountain, the sparkling water of which fell in a pearly spray into a vase of porphyry. In one corner was a hammock, and in the other a magnificent hooka, entwining its black, supple coils around a vase adorned with silver veins. This was all.

"Sit down, my pretty queen," said Fortunio, relieving her of her shawl as he led her to the divan. "Place this cushion behind your back, this one under your elbow, and that one under your feet. There, now! as you see, the Oriental people alone know how to sit comfortably, and one of their poets has made this distich, which contains more sense than all the philosophy in the world: 'It is better to sit than to stand, to lie than to sit, to be dead than to lie.' Find me among all the lamentations of your fashionable rhymes anything worth the simple distich of the good Ferideddin Atar."

Saying this, Fortunio stretched himself on a mat at Musidora's feet.

"You have already attained the second degree of happiness, according to your Arabian poet," said Musidora; "this morning I came very near the third."

"What!" exclaimed Fortunio, rising; "you came near death this morning? Can it be that I have only your shadow before me? But no; you are really living," he added, kissing her foot as if to make sure of it; "I can feel your soft, warm skin through this thin net."

"All the same, if your note had not come at five minutes to twelve, I would now be lying white and cold, assured for a long time of the happiness of horizontality. At noon I would have killed myself."

"Although a passionate Orientalist, I agree with Ferideddin Atar only to the second degree. The last is excellent for men who are not even millionaires, and women whose plainness has reduced them to virtue. You are neither the one nor the other. What motive could drive you to the desperate resolution of killing yourself precisely at noon?"

"Oh! I had the blues. I was tired and weary of life. I knew not what to do with my days; and as I had no means of killing time, I determined to kill myself. And I would have executed my plan if the desire of trying your carriage had not stopped me."

"Many persons have determined to live with a poorer excuse. One of my friends had already placed the pistol in his mouth, when he remembered that he had forgotten to write his epitaph. He therefore laid his pistol on the table, took a sheet of paper and wrote the following:

"'Over cruel fate the will may triumph;
The weakest of mortals may conquer
destiny,
When we have courage and—'

"Here my unhappy friend stopped for the want of a rhyme; he scratched his head, bit his nails, but all in vain; he then rang for his servant, and sent for a dictionary of rhymes, which he perused from one end to the other, without finding what he wanted; for triumph has no rhyme. De Marcilly happened to drop in and took him to the gambling-house, where he won a hundred thousand francs. Since that time, he has lived happy, and has never kissed the muzzle of his pistol. This true story proves the usefulness of difficult rhymes in the matter of epitaphs."

"Ah! Fortunio, you are cruel," said Musidora, reproachfully. "Do you not think a disdained love an excellent reason to die?"

Fortunio fixed his limpid blue eyes on her with an expression of infinite sweetness; then, with a quick movement, threw himself on the divan, clasped her with one arm, and brought her head to his breast.

"Ah! child, who told you your love was disdained?"

At this moment a horrible growl resounded through the house.

Musidora sprang to her feet in alarm.

"It is my tigress; she knows I am near, and wants to see me," Fortunio said quietly. "I suppose she has broken her chain; she is always up to some mischief. Excuse me, madame; I will soothe her with a few words, for she is as jealous of me as a woman."

He took a kriss from beneath one of the cushions, and went out. Musidora heard him talking to the tigress in a strange tongue, which the animal seemed to understand, and to which she responded with gentle growls, while she beat her tail joyfully against the wall as if it were an iron bar. A few minutes later the noise ceased, and Fortunio returned.

He had changed his riding suit for a costume of strange magnificence. It was a brocaded tunic, with wide sleeves, gathered around the waist with a gold cord, and falling around him in heavy, graceful folds; he wore a red velvet cap, embroidered in gold and pearls, with a large tassel, that hung down his back, and his wavy hair escaped from it in the most picturesque disorder; his bare feet were encased in Turkish slippers, and a pair of silk trousers completed his attire.

His slightly opened shirt revealed the marble whiteness of his chest, on which sparkled a small amulet, ornamented with embroidery and bangles, somewhat resembling the little sachets worn by the Neapolitan fishermen.

Did Fortunio wear this through superstition, caprice, as a souvenir, or only through love of its color? We know not, but the bright shades showed off the soft, white skin with wonderful effect.

"Musidora," said he as he entered, "are you hungry or thirsty? We must find something to eat and drink. You must be indulgent, for, as you see, this house is directed by a half-savage man, whose only knowledge in the art of cooking is confined to elephant's feet and buffaloes' humps. Come this way," he added, raising the portiere, "and don't be afraid."

He placed his arm around her waist, like Othello leading Desdemona, and they entered a small boudoir, decorated a la Pompadour; the ceiling was of light green, dotted with small clouds, and peopled by a swarm of Cupids scattering flowers.

Although it was still broad daylight, it was night in this little boudoir, for it is of the most ignoble taste to eat otherwise than by candle-light.

Two chandeliers hung from the ceiling on pink and silver cords, and ten small sconces with entwined branches shed a dazzling light on the gilded furniture and silver flowers of the hangings.

At the end of the room, under a canopy with silver tassels, was a wonderful sofa of white satin brocaded with gold. In every nook and corner were etageres and cabinets, loaded with Chinese figures and Japanese vases; a boudoir worthy of a marquise.

Fortunio took an arm-chair and brought it to the middle of the room; then placing another one opposite, he seated himself, and invited Musidora to do likewise.

"Now, let us eat," he said in a perfectly grave tone. "I have a sharp appetite," and he rolled back his sleeves as if preparing to carve.

Musidora looked at him uneasily, fearing for an instant he had lost his reason; but he seemed perfectly self-possessed, although there was no sign of either table, dishes, or servants.

Suddenly, to Musidora's astonishment, two leaves of the floor folded back, and a magnificent table, with two servants and all that was necessary for a meal, came up through the opening.

The figures and ornaments sparkled with a brilliancy that dazzled the eyes; the green malachite urns, in which the champagne shivered under the white crystals of the ice, contrasted strikingly with the bright yellow of the gold; filigree baskets of gold and silver, wrought more delicately than lace, were filled with the rarest fruits; grapes as yellow as amber, enormous peaches with red, velvety cheeks, and pine-apples exhaled the warm perfumes of the tropics; cherries and strawberries of monstrous size, the first fruits of Spring, and the last gifts that Autumn pours into the basket, met on this table, astonished to find themselves face to face for the first time. Seasons and ordinary laws of nature did not exist for Fortunio.

In porphyry cases arose pyramids of sweetmeats, conserves of roses, pomegranates, oranges, and all that the most luxurious gluttony could unite that is exquisite and ruinously rare.

We have inverted the order of things and commenced by describing the dessert; but is not the dessert the whole of a woman's dinner? But to reassure the reader, who may not consider these things substantial enough for a hero of Fortunio's size and strength, we hasten to add that there were also large armorial platters containing roasted quail surrounded by a wreath of ortolans, a Chinese pheasant, and many other delicacies.

The wines were of a variety to satisfy even a more serious drinker than Fortunio. Decanters of Bohemian glass, ornamented with gold arabesques, contained enough to produce intoxication on a proper scale. Tokay, such as even Metternich never drank, Johannisberg far above the nectar of the gods in flavor and color, and genuine Schiraz of which there existed—at the time this was written—only two bottles in Europe; one was in the possession of George and the other belonged to de Marcilly, who kept them for some supreme occasion.

"You have not kept your word, Fortunio, you are entertaining me with frightful magnificence," said Musidora, in a tone of friendly reproach. "Do you expect visitors? This lunch might serve as a wedding breakfast for Gamache or Gargantua."

"Indeed, my little queen, I have made no preparations; no one detests ceremonies more than I do, and I consider cordiality the best seasoning for a meal. It is merely a simple lunch which is kept ready day and night; so that if I feel hungry at any time I may not be obliged to wait until they have twisted a chickens' neck, plucked its feathers and roasted it. As I have already told you, I am of patriarchal simplicity. I eat only when I am hungry, drink only when I am thirsty, and go to bed when I feel sleepy. But, my dear angel, pray do not forget that you are at the table. You need not fear to disenchant me by eating with a good appetite; I do not share Lord Byron's ideas, and would be immensely grieved if you turned out to be only a shadow."

Notwithstanding Fortunio's pressings, Musidora could only suck drogues and drink two or three glasses of rosy liquor, with a little Barbadoes cream. She was too much agitated to eat; and the presence of the idol of her heart troubled her so much that she could scarcely carry her fork to her mouth. What bliss to dine alone with the impalpable Fortunio! to be served by him in his unknown retreat, to be avenged for Phebe's and Arabelle's sympathizing words in such a splendid manner.

Fortunio overwhelmed her with attentions, and paid her the most delicate and exquisite compliments.

We would like to repeat that brilliant conversation, but we could not do so without showing intolerable conceit; as a conscientious writer, we have made so perfect a hero that we hardly dare make use of him. We feel almost the same embarrassment—*si parva licet componere magnis*—that Milton must have experienced when he had to put words in the mouth of the Creator, in his admirable poem, "Paradise Lost." We can find nothing beautiful enough. Moreover, the course of narration forces us to use phrases such as, "At this brilliant sally of Fortunio's, a delicious smile illuminated Musidora's lips." It is absolutely necessary that the sally should be brilliant—or seem so, at least—which is already difficult enough. There is also another deplorable situation for an author who is gifted with some modesty; it is when the hero recites a poem that produces a great effect on his audience, who after every verse exclaim, "Admirable!" "Sublime!" "Well!" "Very well!" "Still better!" But as we are timid, we will employ the method of the old painters, who, when they could not draw an object, wrote in its place *"Currus venustus,"* or *"Pulcher homo,"* according to the nature of the subject, whether a carriage or a man.

The lunch was over; the table had disappeared through the trap like an accursed soul at the opera, and Fortunio, seated on the sofa, was bathing his hand in Musidora's wavy blonde hair. Her head, weighed down by love, drooped like a flower under the dew; her heart beat wildly, her arms hung powerless at her side; she was in an ecstasy of bliss. Fortunio leaned over her, and their lips met in a long, delicious kiss.

CHAPTER XVII

WHAT HE WAS

BUT we must no longer intrude on their felicity. The goddess of love smiles benignly on them, but casts such reproachful glances on us now and then that we are forced to withdraw.

We would willingly remain, for nothing is more chaste and sacred to us than the love of two beings so young and beautiful; but few persons share our opinion. So, to our great regret, we shall leave the two lovers locked in each other's arms, and will busy ourselves in refuting a few objections which we foresee.

Musidora has not spoken a single word of love to Fortunio. That is a grave mistake; she should have discoursed indefinitely on the metaphysics of the most transcendent sentiment. We would then have had a fine occasion to demonstrate how the heart is made to love, and we could have filled a number of pages without trouble. But the fact is, she has said nothing; and, in our capacity as a romancer, truth is too sacred to us to permit the invention of a single phrase.

Her eyes filled with moist light, her beating heart, her trembling voice, explain the state of her soul more eloquently than we could do in the most studied phrases. And Fortunio's silent kiss was, in its way, a perfect response. Moreover, people talk only when they have nothing to say. Some may think that Musidora was wanting in modesty; it was only the second time she had seen Fortunio, and she showed her love in her glance, making no attempt to disguise it.

But, as an excuse, we will say that Musidora was no longer a coquette; and besides, love is generous, and must be shared.

Musidora was not one of those who think that an avowal will put love to flight; she allowed Fortunio to read her thoughts, that she might inspire the same sentiment within his heart. This is a skillful calculation, that succeeds oftener than we think. In beautiful and strong natures, love begets love. This is why she attacked Fortunio's heart with her deadliest weapons—an excellent manner of opening a campaign. Moreover, why should she delay? With a man as fugitive as Fortunio, it would be a doubtful chance.

Let us take advantage of the moment when our two principal personages are forgetting the existence of the world, to speak of our hero; for it is the writer's duty to disentangle before the reader's eyes the skein he has entangled at pleasure, and to dissipate the mysterious clouds he has gathered from the beginning of the story, that the end might not be foreseen.

Fortunio was a young nobleman of the bluest blood, as aristocratic as the king, and as perfect a gentleman. His father, the Marquis Fortunio, whose fortune was sadly impaired, sent him at an early age to India, to live with an uncle, a nabob of colossal and Titanic wealth.

Fortunio's youth was spent in hunting tigers and elephants, in being carried in a palanquin, drinking arrack, chewing betel, and watching the dances of the bibiaderi, with their little feet loaded with golden bells, and their waists bound in aromatic wood.

His uncle, who had peculiar ideas on the education of children, allowed Fortunio's character to develop in entire freedom; he was curious to see what would become of a child who never received a reproach, and who would have all possible means of gratifying his every wish. His inexhaustible wealth made the execution of this plan of education an easy matter, and his nephew's caprices were always satisfied on the spot.

He never spoke to him of morals or religion; he taught him to fear neither God nor devil, not even the civil code; laws do not exist for one who has an income of twenty millions. He allowed this vigorous human plant to push its shoots to the right and left; he pruned nothing, trimmed nothing—neither thorn, knot, nor misshapen branch. But, on the other hand, he did not pluck a single leaf or flower. Fortunio remained as God had made him.

Never an ungratified desire entered his heart, to gnaw it with its sharp teeth; his always-satisfied passions left no crease or wrinkle on his brow; he was gentle, calm, strong as a god, of whom he almost possessed the power. Young, rich, intelligent, he could envy no one, and felt himself envied by all. He could not even envy feminine beauty, for his own was cast in as delicate a mold.

At fifteen he had a harem, five hundred slaves of all colors to serve him, and as much gold as he could spend; his uncle's fortune was at his command, and he used it lavishly.

Never did anxiety for the future cloud his brow; he lived free from care in an atmosphere of gold, never dreaming that it might be otherwise. His astonishment was great when he discovered that there existed persons who had not even three hundred thousand pounds of income.

Like all spoilt children, Fortunio became a superior man; he had his vices, but he also had his virtues.

Ordinary teachers will not understand that every mountain has its valley, every tower its well, and everything that sparkles under the sun has a deep and dark excavation from whence it came.

Nothing is more abominable than a man as plain and polished as a board, incapable of being hanged, and without the germ of a crime or two within him.

Fortunio was capable of everything, good or evil; but his position was such that it was unnecessary for him to harm anyone. From the height of his riches, men seemed so small that he disdained to trouble himself about them; that black swarm of wretches struggling under his feet, and sweating a whole year to earn the gold he spent in one minute, seemed unworthy of the attention of a well-born man. He understood charity and philanthropy but little; but his caprices showered an abundance of gold around him, and all who lived in his shadow soon became rich. In a word, he did more good than thirty thousand virtuous men who distribute economical soup. He was beneficent as the sun is, which, without giving a penny to anybody, gives life and wealth to the world.

Having never had a teacher, he knew many things, and knew them perfectly—having learned them himself. Occupying a high position, and being curbed by no prejudices of birth, he saw far and wide.

Had he wished to be emperor or king, he would have succeeded; with his audacity, his intelligence, his beauty, his knowledge of men and powerful means of corruption, nothing would have been easier. Through indifference and disdain, he allowed the potentates to retain their thrones in peace, contenting himself with being king in deeds.

A distinctive trait of his was that, being all-powerful, he was satiated with nothing; he valued nothing above its worth, but he had no systematic disdain.

As all his wishes were accomplished almost as soon as formed, he never experienced that fatigue caused by the longings of the soul toward an unattainable object; for it is not the enjoyment that wears, but the unsatisfied craving.

He loved wine, horses, and women, as if he had never had any; all that was beautiful, magnificent and brilliant pleased him; he appreciated the charm of a moss-covered cottage, enframed in trailing vines, as much as the splendors of a marble palace with sculptured columns; he admired art and nature equally. He passionately loved golden-haired women, but that did not prevent him from admiring dusky beauties; Spanish maids charmed him, but he adored English girls, and did not disdain Indian beauties; French women possessed a great attraction for him; and he had a decided taste for Raphael's virgins and Titian's courtesans. In brief, he was an eclectic of the highest order, and no one could be more cosmopolitan than he. Nevertheless, we admit it to his shame or praise, he had never had a mistress, and no one knew his legal domicile.

As to his slaves, black, yellow, or red, they were flogged as often as the Scapins of comedy or the Davus of Plaute's plays.

Yet, strange to say, they worshiped him, and would have thrown themselves into the fire to please him; he treated them so much like animals that they had come to believe they were dogs, and he had inspired in them the passionate servility of that animal.

He never repeated an order—he seldom ever took the trouble of formulating it by words—a gesture, a glance, sufficed.

There were always two saddled horses and a ready carriage in his stable; a dinner was ever ready in the kitchen; he had never waited for anything or anyone. Obstacles and delays were unknown to him—he knew not what to-morrow meant. For him, everything was to-day; he had the power to make the future the present.

When his uncle died he was nearly twenty; and the desire to see Europe, France, and Paris took possession of him.

He came, bringing twenty fortunes—tons of gold, cases of diamonds.

Accustomed as he was to Oriental splendors, everything at first seemed miserable and contemptible; the richest noblemen appeared like ragged beggars. He soon, however, discovered a world of ideas of which he had never suspected the existence under this poor and dull aspect. In these new regions he made gigantic strides, and thanks to his admirable tact, he was soon as well-informed as a true Parisian.

After tasting the savage charms of uncivilized life, it pleased him to try all the refinements of extreme civilization. After hunting the tiger on an elephant in the jungles of Java, he found some attraction in chasing a fox in a red coat with members of parliament. After witnessing the dances of the bibiaderi, seated on a mat of perfumed bamboo in the shadow of the pagoda of Benares, he enjoyed the dancing of Mademoiselle Taglioni in the "God and the Bayadere," at the opera; only, at first he found it difficult to restrain himself from beheading the people who annoyed him.

The only thing to which his Oriental habits could not bend was to see his house open to everybody, and allowing bold pirates to slip into the most secret corners of his intimate life under the name of intimate friends.

He met his companions at theaters or on the promenades, but none had ever set foot within his home, for when he was obliged to receive them he rented apartments for the purpose, and left them immediately, for fear of seeing them return.

His life was divided into two distinct parts: one all exterior—dissipations, fine suppers, and follies of all kinds; the other, mysterious, and perfectly unknown.

Someone had remarked to him that he was not altogether fashionable, as he had neither duchess nor danseuse; to this he answered that the first were too old, and the second too thin.

However, he was seen the next day at the bouffes with a danseuse, and the following day at the opera with a duchesse; the danseuse was plump, and the duchess young—something doubly extraordinary.

Having made this concession to propriety, Fortunio resumed his ordinary mode of life, appearing and disappearing without saying whence he came or where he went.

The curiosity of his comrades had been greatly excited at first, but by degrees this had subsided, and they accepted Fortunio for what he was.

Musidora's love had reawakened the desire to penetrate the mysteries of his life, and his eccentricities were commented on more than ever; but the curious were forced to confine themselves to vague conjectures. The truth was known to no one—even George knew nothing of Fortunio further than what related to his life in India.

We have nothing more to communicate to the reader about Fortunio; however, we hope to soon trace him to his secret retreat.

CHAPTER XVIII

ANGEL OF SLEEP

THE carriage, drawn by the dapple-grays, returned empty to Musidora's home, to the great astonishment of Jacinthe, Jack, and Zamore. The dove Musidora had remained in the nest of the falcon Fortunio.

A ray of rosy sunlight played around the curtains of a sumptuous couch with carved and twisted columns. Like an uncertain bee hovering about a flower, it trembled about Musidora's lips. She was sleeping, her disordered hair lying about her, with her arms gracefully curved above her head.

Fortunio, standing beside the bed, looked with melancholy attention on the young girl, sheltered under the wing of the angel of sleep.

A curl of her fair hair coiled around her arm, the end resting on her throat, which it seemed ready to sting like Cleopatra's asp; and one of her little rosy feet, with nails like polished agates, peeped from under the coverlets.

Her ideal whiteness contrasted prettily with Fortunio's bronzed face: it was the yellow amber of Italy and the blue-veined alabaster of England; and one would have hesitated to say which formed the most charming picture.

Fortunio's trained eye analyzed the beauty of her face with the admiring glance of an artist; he looked at her as he would on a beautiful horse or statue.

"She is very beautiful," he said, half aloud; "but I decidedly prefer my Javanese girl, Soudja-Sari. I will go to her to-morrow."

"Did you speak, my lord?" asked Musidora, raising her long lashes.

"No, my little queen," answered Fortunio, as he bent down and kissed her.

We can confidently affirm that Fortunio almost forgot Soudja-Sari at that moment.

CHAPTER XIX

EYES OF JET?

We have fallen back into our old perplexities.

We managed to discover the source of Fortunio's wealth; we procured satisfactory information on the way he was brought up, on his habits, morals, and philosophy; notwithstanding all his skill in evading curious eyes, we succeeded in taking him by the collar, and penetrated into one of his retreats—perhaps even into his principal lair. And all our trouble has been in vain; we must now resume our search and find a clue to this new mystery.

What evil genius induced Fortunio to pronounce so incongruous a name as Soudja-Sari, as he gazed at Musidora?

It is natural that our readers should desire to know who is Soudja-Sari—Soudja-Sari, the Javanese. Was it she who wrote the verses translated by the date merchant?

It is impossible for us to decide this important question, as this is the first time we ever heard the name; she is as unknown to us as the Grand Khan of Tartary, and we admit that Fortunio's remark was entirely out of place.

Had he not Musidora, a bewitching creature, a matchless pearl, whose soul, regenerated by love, was as charming as the envelope—the supreme effort of nature to prove its power—all that we can imagine of delicacy and perfection?

Was this not enough for one novel? and can we tolerate that our hero should divide his heart between two mistresses? Better give Musidora six lovers—our fair readers would forgive us more easily—heaven alone knows why. But we will make an effort to satisfy the reader's curiosity.

Soudja-Sari cannot be one of Fortunio's discarded mistresses, since he has just said he would see her to-morrow. Where will he see her? Not in Java, certainly, for there is no railway from Paris to Java; and even if Fortunio possessed the wand of Abaris, he could not make the journey in a single day; and he has promised Musidora to show himself in an opera-box with her at the very next play. She must therefore be in Paris, or in the suburbs.

But where? In the Faubourg Saint-Germain, at Saint-Maur, or Auteuil? *Hic jacet lepus*—here lies the hare.

All we can say is that Soudja-Sari signifies dreamy eyes, given her according to the Oriental custom of choosing names from physical qualities.

Thanks to the translation of this significative name, which we owe to the kindness of a member of the Asiatic Society who is strong on Javanese, Malay, and other Indian dialects, we know that Soudja-Sari is a pretty girl, with velvety eyes, full of reverie.

Which will triumph—Soudja-Sari's eyes of jet, or Musidora's sea-green pupils?

CHAPTER XX

SOUDJA-SARI?

Fortunio's house was on the bank of the river; a marble stairway, on which the water rose or fell according to the abundance of rain or the dryness of the season, led from the boudoir to a gilded boat covered with a silk awning.

Fortunio proposed a sail on the river before breakfast, and Musidora joyfully accepted.

She sat under the shade of the awning, and Fortunio stretched himself at her feet, smoking his hooka, while four negroes in red tunics propelled the bark, that glided like a kingfisher cutting the water with its wings.

Musidora ran her delicate finger through Fortunio's black, silky hair in silent rapture; she held him at last; the so-much-longed-for Fortunio was at her feet, his head resting on her lap. At a single step she had penetrated into the depths of this mysterious life.

She possessed the heart of the man she adored; she was oblivious of all that did not concern her love and happiness; her former existence was completely effaced. Her life dated from the moment she had seen Fortunio on the previous day.

Her only fear was that her life would not be long enough to prove her love to him— she wanted to carry her love beyond the tomb. She, who until then had been a greater materialist and atheist than Voltaire, now firmly believed in the immortality of the soul, and hoped to love Fortunio through eternity.

The bark glided gracefully over the smooth mirror of the river; the four oars did not create the faintest spray, and the only sound was the rippling of the water against the sides of the boat.

Fortunio suddenly dropped his hooka, took Musidora's two feet, placed them on his chest as on an ivory stool, and began to whistle a strange, melancholy melody.

The shadows of the poplars on the shore fell on the gilded boat, which seemed to swim in a sea of foliage. Bright butterflies circled around them, their gauzy wings reflecting gayly in the sunlight; there was not a breath of wind; the flexible tips of the reeds were motionless, and the flag in the stern trailed gracefully in the water. The sky, bathed in light, was changed from azure blue to silver gray by the intensity of the noon sun, and far in the horizon arose a warm, reddish mist, as in an Egyptian landscape.

"Upon my honor!" exclaimed Fortunio, throwing off the cashmere cloak from his shoulders, "I am tempted to take a bath!" and he jumped over the side.

Although Musidora was herself a good swimmer, she felt a sudden terror as the waters closed over his head; but he arose immediately, shaking his long hair, streaming over his shoulders. Fortunio swam like the most graceful Triton of Neptune's court—even fishes had no advantage over him.

His white, polished shoulders, covered with pearly drops, glittered like submerged marble; the billows enveloped him in a loving embrace, and hung silver bracelets on his arms. A few aquatic plants had caught in his hair, and the pale green relieved the raven hue of his locks. He might have been taken for a god of the waters. Neither Phœbus Apollo, the young and radiant God Scamandra, nor Endymion, the sighing lover of the moon, nor any of the ideals realized by sculptors or poets, could sustain a comparison with our hero.

He was the last type of manly beauty disappeared from the world since the new era. Phidias himself, or Lysippe, Alexander's sculptor, could not have dreamed anything more perfect.

"Why do you not take a bath?" he called to Musidora, as he approached the boat; "I have been told you could swim."

Musidora sprang into the water, her long hair floating behind her like a golden mantle. They floated along side by side like twin swans; and having described a few graceful curves, they returned to their point of departure at the foot of the marble stairway.

Two beautiful mulatto girls awaited them with long, warm mantles, which they wrapped around them.

"Well, my beautiful naiad," said Fortunio, as he draped his cloak about him, "do we not resemble two antique statues?" I make a passable Triton, and fresh water has nothing more to envy the salty waves, for a Venus fully worthy of the other has now emerged from it. Why is there not a Phidias on the shore?—the modern world would have its Venus Anadyomen. But our sculptors can do nothing better than cut stones to pave the streets, or illustrious men in black coats; in this accursed civilization, which has no other aim than to place the aristocracy of candle-makers on pedestals, the symmetry of form is lost; and one of these fine mornings the Creator will be forced to leave his arm-chair to come and knead this terrestrial globe over again. A less civilized nation would build you a temple and erect statues in your honor, my little queen; they would make a goddess of you; the goddess Musidora would sound very pretty."

"Married to the god Fortunio in the church of Olympus—otherwise prudish divinities would not receive me at their Wednesday or Friday balls," laughed Musidora.

And the two lovers reëntered the house amid this gay banter.

And Soudja-Sari? We will soon give you some information about her, curious readers.

Chapter XXI

ALFRED'S RESOLVE

The day passed like a beautiful dream. Our two lovers gave themselves up to their happiness. Musidora sat curled up like a kitten on the sofa of the little boudoir, her velvety cheek resting on her lover's shoulder, while he whispered tender words of love into her ear; she listened in silent rapture for a long time, then, as if a sudden thought had flashed through her mind, she raised her head quickly and plunged her eyes into his, as if striving to grasp his secret thoughts.

"Ah!" she cried, passionately, "the day you cease to love me I will kill you!"

"Very well," replied Fortunio quietly; "you are the one hundred and fifty-third woman who has made that promise, and I still feel passably well. It does not prevent me from enjoying life."

Her arms relaxed from his neck and her head fell back; he looked at her; she was pale, her teeth were clenched, her lips were livid—she was in a paroxysm of rage.

"The devil!" thought Fortunio; "can she be in earnest? Those frail and delicate little demons are capable of anything. This promises to be amusing. After all, it would be a sweet death, and I could not choose better;

no one has yet loved me enough to kill me. It would be rather odd, if, after passing safely through all the furies of tropical passions, I had my throat cut at last by a delicate Parisian blonde who has not strength enough to fight a duel with a bug."

"In that case, my queen," he added aloud, "you have just signed my title to eternity. I shall surpass Melchisedec and Methuselah."

"You will always love me then?" she asked anxiously.

Assuredly; when one loves it is forever, or what would be the use of loving? Does not eternity go with infinity? I shall adore you in this world and in the next, if there is one—and there must be one for this purpose; love has stores of eternity at its disposition."

"Oh! the wicked scoffer who believes in nothing!" cried Musidora, with a charming little pout.

"Why, I believe in everything; I believe in the charity of philanthropists, in the virtue of women, in the good faith of journalists, in cemetery epitaphs, and in all that is most incredible. I only wish there were four persons in the trinity, that my faith might be more meritorious."

"Fie! Fortunio, you are an atheist! and it is not good form," retorted Musidora, as she toyed with the amulet that sparkled around Fortunio's neck.

"Atheist! Why, I have three gods: gold, beauty, and happiness! I am at least as pious as Pius Æneas of blessed memory."

"Believe in God, Fortunio; it never does any harm, as old women say, when prescribing a remedy for the headache or toothache."

"Ah! my love, are we going to discuss theology? Let us rather have dinner, and go to the opera. I must present you to the universe. Let us eat, and then go."

"Why, do you think I can go in this dress?" exclaimed Musidora.

"We shall stop at your house, and you can change your dress."

After a dinner as sumptuous as on the previous day, the charming couple entered the carriage.

They stopped at Musidora's house, and she made a ravishing toilet, dressing in white from head to foot, like a bride. The sweet and pure expression of her face, brightened by interior bliss, harmonized admirably with her toilet.

Fortunio, guessing the intention that had influenced her choice, drew a morocco case from his pocket, containing a necklace, earrings and bracelets, all of priceless pearls.

"Here is my wedding gift, Madame la Marquise," said he, as he clasped the necklace around her throat. "Now, my child, you are at your best; and I wager that twenty women at least will burst with jealousy. You will be the cause of several cases of jaundice, and more than one lover will be abused like a slave on account of the bad humor you will excite in the feminine camp."

When Musidora appeared in the front of the box with Fortunio, a thrill of admiration ran through the house which almost broke out in applause.

Phebe, who was in a box with Alfred, turned as pale as the moon before the sun; and Arabelle, who had pretensions on Fortunio's heart, almost fainted with the violence of her emotion As to the Roman girl Cinthie, she smiled sweetly, and came to Musidora's box during an entr'acte, with Phebe.

"One would mistake you for a bride?" said Phebe with a venomous smile.

"It would not be a mistake," said Musidora; "I was married yesterday, with the dream of my heart."

"I was sure of it," cried Cinthie; "a novena never fails."

"Madame," said George, entering the box, "allow me to place my homage at your feet, if there is room. The turnout is yours; when shall I send it?"

"Thanks, George; Fortunio has forestalled you."

"Well! Fortunio," continued George, "have you just returned from Singapore, Calcutta, or Hades? You probably met Musidora there; she is on good terms with His Satanic Majesty."

"No; I have simply been to Neuilly, like a mere constitutional king. Have you had Cinthie framed yet?"

The Roman shook her head negatively.

Phebe leaned over to Fortunio, and informed him in a whisper that Cinthie was in love with a six-foot fencing-master with black whiskers, and three rows of teeth like a crocodile, to whom she gave all her money.

"That is just like her," said Fortunio.

During this conversation, Alfred, who had remained alone, was examining Musidora through his opera glass. "Decidedly, I must make love to Musidora," he said; "Phebe is too cold. It would be of the best taste to supplant Fortunio, with his grand airs; it would make a sensation, and restore my reputation. I cannot deny that I have lost three women lately. How in the world can Fortunio afford to spend so much? There is some mystery. Strange, very strange, excessively strange; but I will penetrate this mystery, and win Musidora."

Having taken this praiseworthy resolution, Alfred felt quite satisfied with himself, and assumed the most triumphant look in the world as he passed his white-gloved hand through his curly hair.

CHAPTER XXII

FIRE!

We will not undertake to relate, day by day, hour by hour, the life led by our two lovers. What human tongue is eloquent enough to depict those adorable nothings, those childish raptures, of which love is composed? How describe in humble prose the exquisite moments, the long ecstasies, always more and more ardent, without falling into bombastic nonsense?

Fortunio allowed himself to be swayed by Musidora's passion; true love is as contagious as pestilence. Although a scoffer and skeptic, he had not that dryness of heart which is often the result of precocious and easily obtained pleasures. He abhorred grimaces of sentimentality more than death, and never allowed himself to be won by artfulness. Hypocrisy in love revolted him, but he was always touched by the least sign of true affection, and he would not have repulsed a beggar or a worthless cur that loved him truly. Although his immense riches made the possession of all dazzling and magnificent realities accessible, the little blue flower of innocent love bloomed sweetly in a corner of his heart. The wild, unrestrained life he had led had not dulled his perceptions. He had more cunning than an octogenarian diplomate, and more candor than Cherubim at the feet of his godmother. He had led the life of Don Juan, and yet he would have enjoyed a walk with a school-girl in an apple-green dress, on the banks of the Lignon. He abandoned himself calmly to the strangest contradictions, and never tried to be logical in the least. His passions led him, and he never tried to resist them; he was good-humored in the morning and wicked at night; oftener kind than cruel, because he was in good health. He was handsome and rich, and naturally inclined to think the world well-ordained; but whatever his humor might be, he was always what he seemed. He admired the most contradictory things—he loved scarlet and sky blue equally, but he detested romantic phrases and the fashionable slang of the day. What had charmed him most in Musidora, was that she had given him her heart without knowing him, and without a word.

Musidora's victory over Fortunio was the topic of conversation in the gay world; the little Parisian cat with green eyes had vanquished the Indian tiger—she held him caged in her love, and the imperceptible bars were stronger than iron. She seemed to have completely fascinated him, and poor Soudja-Sari must have been sadly neglected. Musidora's charms had triumphed over the Javanese girl's beauty. Fortunio conducted himself more like a European with her than he had with any woman since his arrival in France; he was at her house every day, and scarcely left her side. The sultan Fortunio had become an Amadis; a princess could not have had a more fervent and respectful admirer. Nevertheless, he sometimes had returns of Asiatic ferocity, and the tiger-claws emerged sharp and threatening from under the velvet of his paws.

Tonight he came in after she had gone to sleep, and as he stood gazing at her, a wild idea seemed to suddenly flash through his brain. He picked up the small Etruscan lamp, and holding it to the fringe of the curtains, set fire to them with the utmost coolness. He then entered the next room, and went through the same operation.

The large tongues of flame soon scorched the ceiling, and the dazzling light penetrated Musidora's eyelids; she awoke startled, and seeing the room full of fire and smoke, uttered a cry of terror.

"Fortunio! Fortunio!" she cried; "save me!"

Fortunio was leaning quietly against the mantel-piece, watching the progress of the flames with an air of satisisfaction.

"I am stifling!" cried Musidora, throwing herself from the bed, and running toward the door. "But what are you doing, Fortunio? why do you not call for help?"

"It is too late!" he answered, as he wrapped a blanket around her and took her in his arms.

The unendurable and suffocating heat would have rendered the exit difficult and perilous for a man less vigorous and strong than Fortunio. He sprang to the door, ran down the stairs with the lightness of a bird, opened the door himself—for it would have taken too long to arouse the Swiss from his drunken stupor—and jumped with his precious burden into a carriage that seemed to be awaiting them. He deposited Musidora on the seat at his side, and the carriage started off.

The flames had burst through the windows with huge columns of smoke; the household was now awakened, and cries of "Fire! fire!" repeated in every tone, resounded through the night.

The sparks flew about in all directions, like golden spangles, on the red background of the burning house, like a magnificent aurora borealis.

"I wager Jack will not awaken until he is done through," said Fortunio, laughing.

Musidora did not reply. She had fainted.

Chapter XXIII

THE JAGUAR

When Musidora recovered her senses, she found herself lying on a bed of elegant simplicity; Fortunio was seated at the bedside.

Nothing could be more charming and coquettish than the interior of this room. The furniture was of exquisite taste: it was not that royal and almost insolent luxury that dazzles rather than charms; there was something sweet, home-like, and delicately pure, that pleased the soul more than the eye. The designer of this room must have been a poet. The poet was Fortunio.

"How do you like your little nest?" he said, as Musidora opened her eyes.

"Perfectly well," replied Musidora; "but whose house is this? Where am I?"

"What a classic question; in your own home, of course."

"My home!" she cried, bewildered.

"Yes; I bought this house, with the intention of burning yours," continued Fortunio quietly, as if he were saying the most natural thing in the world.

"What! it was you who burned my house?"

"Yes; I came to the conclusion that the fire could not start by itself, so I had to set it."

"Are you mad, Fortunio, or laughing at me?"

"Not at all; have I said anything out of reason? The architecture of your nest was of the Doric order, which is particularly odious to me; and then—"

"And then what? This is a fine motive for burning up a whole neighborhood," said Musidora, seeing he had stopped in the middle of his phrase.

"And then," resumed Fortunio, a greenish hue spreading over his face, and his eyes lighting up, "I could no longer bear to see you in a house given by another. I hated every chair, every piece of furniture, as a mortal enemy. I could have stabbed your sofa as if it were a man. Your dresses, rings, jewels, produced a cold and venomous sensation, like the touch of a serpent. Everything recalled to my mind what I wished to banish forever, but which returned incessantly with more fury than a swarm of bees, thrusting their poisoned stings into my heart. You cannot imagine with what revengeful satisfaction I saw the flames devour those draperies and furniture; with what delight I saw them embrace those execrable walls, as if they understood my fury. Honest fire! purifier of all! your rain of sparks and ardent flames fell on me like a May dew, and I felt peace germ within my heart as under a beneficent shower. Nothing is left—nothing but a pile of ashes and cinders. I breathe more freely, and feel my chest expanding. But you still have that wrapper, more odious than the robe of Nessus. I must tear it to pieces, crush it under my foot, as if it were a living thing."

And seizing the garment, he tore it to shreds, threw it to the ground, and trampled it with the mad fury of a bull goring the red cloak abandoned by the cholulos.

Frightened by his wild rage, Musidora cowered under the coverlets, crossed her arms, and awaited the end of this strange scene in silent anxiety.

"Ah, I would like to flay you alive!" cried Fortunio, approaching the bed.

For a moment she feared he would execute his threat, and pass from the optative to the present.

"Yes," continued the untamed young jaguar; "with what delight I would tear that skin, so soft and velvety, on which the lips of your infamous lovers have rested! I would that no one had ever seen, touched, or heard you. I would break the mirrors that have reflected your image for an instant. I am jealous of your father, for his blood circulates freely in the charming net-work of your veins; I am jealous of the air that you breathe, and which seems to kiss you; I am jealous of your shadow, which follows you like a lover. I must have your whole existence—future, past, and present. I know not what restrains me from killing George and de Marcilly, and have Willis dug from his grave, to throw his corpse to the dogs."

As he talked, he paced around the room like one of those emaciated wolves in the menageries, that prowl around their cage, rubbing their black noses against the bars. He paused, paced two or three times around the room, bowed his head on the bed, and sobbed bitterly; the storm that had begun in thunder was dissolving itself into rain.

"Foolish Fortunio! who cannot see that I have never loved anyone but him," said Musidora, pressing his head against her heart. "Oh! my love! I was born on the day that I met you; my life dates with my love. Why should you be jealous of Musidora? She is dead. Are you not my god, my creator? Did you not make me of nothing? Why torment yourself?"

"Forgive me, my angel. I was brought up very near the sun, on a soil of fire; I am extreme in everything, and my passions roar in my heart like caged lions. But three o'clock is striking; close your green eyes, my little crocodile. Come, go to sleep, my child."

Chapter XXIV

WITHIN THE PALACE

We promised our readers to discover Soudja-Sari, the Javanese beauty with dreamy eyes. As she is now the neglected heroine, since Fortunio loves Musidora, the interest is naturally concentrated on her. But we have made a rash promise, and one difficult to accomplish; our only way to find Soudja-Sari would be to follow Fortunio, and how can you expect us to follow a gay fellow carried away by thorough-bred horses? And besides, have we really the right to spy on our hero? Would it be delicate on our part to pry into his secrets? Is it his fault if we have taken him for the hero of our novel?

There are so many others who ask for nothing better than to see their private correspondence in print.

Still, we must by some means find Soudja-Sari, the dreamy-eyed beauty.

We shall, therefore, renounce all the artifices usual to writers to excite and graduate interest, and as it will soon be time to affix the glorious monosyllable "End" to our novel, we shall betray Fortunio's secret.

Fortunio, as we have already said, was brought up in India by his uncle, a nabob of fabulous wealth. After his uncle's death he came to France, bringing enough treasures to buy a kingdom. One of his greatest pleasures was to have a mixture of barbarism and civilized life—to be at the same time a satrap and a fashionable man. It suited his caprice to have one foot in India, and the other in France.

To attain this double aim, he purchased in a retired quarter of Paris a whole block of houses, with large gardens in the center. He had demolished all the interior constructions, and had left but the facades as an outside wall, and built up all the windows. It was therefore impossible to catch a glimpse of the buildings he erected within this square, unless one went over them in a balloon.

Four houses, one on each side of the square, served as entrance to Fortunio; and he went in and out, sometimes on one side, sometimes on the other, without attracting attention.

A small shop, presided over by one of his devoted servants, communicated with the interior buildings, and served as a place for receiving supplies, without exciting suspicion.

It was in this unknown palace, as difficult to find as the Eldorado sought by the Spaniards, that Fortunio spent those mysterious periods which excited the curiosity of his friends.

He would remain there a week, two weeks, even a month, without reappearing, according to his caprice.

The workmen employed on the buildings had been liberally paid to keep the secret, and then scattered over different parts of the globe. Fortunio had sent them away without arousing their suspicions—some to America, others to India and Africa; they had been offered advantageous positions, which seemed to arise opportunely, and of which they had been the dupes.

The Eldorado, the palace of gold, as Fortunio had named it, did not belie its title: gold sparkled everywhere, and Nero's palace could not have been more magnificent.

Imagine a large court-yard, enframed in twisted columns of white marble, entwined with golden vines. Under this quadruple portico were the doors of the apartments, made of cedar, preciously carved.

In the center of this court-yard were four porphyry stairways, leading to a pond filled with warm diamond water, which could be raised to the level of the ground or lowered to the level of the lowest step.

The remainder of the space was filled with orange trees, angsoka with yellow flowers, palms, aloes, and all kinds of tropical fruits.

Fortunio, who was as sensitive to cold as a Hindoo, had made of this an immense conservatory that completely inclosed this marvelous nest.

A vault of glass formed his sky; he was not, however, deprived of rain: when he desired a change of weather in his crystal atmosphere, he commanded rain, and it was given him at once. Invisible pipes, perforated with small holes, showered a spray of pearls on this virgin forest of odd plants.

Thousands of humming-birds and birds of paradise flew freely in this immense cage, sparkling in the air like living-winged flowers; peacocks, with collars of lapis-lazuli and tufts of rubies, strutted about proudly, sweeping the ground with their magnificent tails.

A second court-yard contained the slaves' quarters.

One inconvenience of this construction was the lack of view; but Fortunio's inventive genius had remedied this: the windows of his drawing-room opened on the most marvelous dioramas, that produced enchanting illusions.

One day it was Naples, with its blue sea, amphitheater of white houses, its smoking volcano, and its flowery islands; the next, it was Venice, the marble domes of San-Georgio, the Dogana, or ducal palace; or a Swiss landscape, if Fortunio happened to be in a pastoral humor. But oftener there were Asiatic perspectives: Benares, Madras, Masulipatnam, or other picturesque scenes.

In the morning his valet would inquire what country would be chosen for that day.

"What have you ready?" Fortunio would ask; "show me your card." And the valet would hand him a tablet on which the names of sites and cities were engraved. Fortunio would point to the scene that took his fancy, as if he were merely ordering a mirror at Tortoni's.

He lived there as happy as a rat in a Holland cheese, indulging in all the refinements of Asiatic luxuries, waited on by slaves, worshiped like a god, and beheading, with a dexterity that would have done honor to a Turkish executioner, whosoever displeased him. The bodies were thrown into a well filled with quick-lime, and quickly consumed. But for some time past, influenced no doubt by his civilized surroundings, he had indulged less frequently in that pastime, and did not resort to it unless intoxicated, or for Soudja-Sari's amusement.

Before entering his Eldorado, he resumed his Oriental costume: the embroidered robe and turban, the yellow morocco slippers, and the kriss, with the hilt starred in diamonds.

None of the Indians, man or woman, shut in this magnificent palace, understood a word of French, and they were in entire ignorance of what part of the world they were in.

Neither Soudja-Sari, his favorite; Rimi-Pahes, whose long black hair enveloped her like a mantle of jet; Koukong-Alis, whose eyebrows arched like rainbows; Sicara, nor Cambana, suspected that they were in Paris, for the very good reason that they did not know that Paris existed.

Thanks to this ignorance, Fortunio governed this little world with as much despotism as if he were in India.

He passed entire days seated motionless on a pile of cushions, his feet resting on one of his slaves, following with an indolent gaze the bluish spirals of smoke from his hooka, and plunged in that delicious stupor so dear to Oriental, which is the greatest delight that can be tasted in this world, since it is oblivion of all human things.

From the large Indian flowers arose penetrating and pungent perfumes, that intoxicated like wine or opium; jets of rose-water arose and fell in large vases of rock-crystal, with a soft, melodious murmur. And as a crowning magnificence, the vault of glass, illuminated by the sun, formed a diamond sky to this palace of gold: it was a fairy tale realized.

It was a thousand leagues from Paris, in full Orient, in the midst of "Thousand-and-One-Nights," and yet the muddy street, teeming with life and bustle, was only two paces away; the lantern of the police office balanced its dim star in the fog; the booksellers sold their law-books with their vari-colored edges; the constitutional chart opened its tri-colored flowers. Humanity breathed the atmosphere of gas and molasses of modern civilization; they dabbled in the mire of muddy prose; all was tumult, smoke, and rain, ugliness and misery, under a gray sky. It was the ignoble, hideous Paris that you all know.

Here existed a sparkling, perfumed, harmonious world—a world of women, birds, and flowers; an enchanted palace which the magician Fortunio had created in the very midst of Paris—a poet's dream realized by a poetic millionaire.

On one side, labor, with its bare and blackened arms, and breasts heaving like forge bellows; on the other, sweet leisure, nonchalantly leaning on its elbow; delicate laziness with its frail, white hands, resting the whole day long from the fatigue of having slept the whole night; the most perfect tranquillity side by side with the most feverish agitation—the most complete antithesis.

Thus did Fortunio lead a double existence, and enjoy at the same time the luxuries of Asia and Paris. This mysterious retreat was like a nest of poetry, where he went from time to time to hatch his dreams; here only he found comfort and rest, for he could not adapt himself to European ways, and the perpetual intermingling of sexes. He shared the opinion of the Sultan Schariar: he would have liked to buy a young maid every day and behead her the next morning. He did not push his jealousy to that point, but he could not love a woman who had already had a lover, and it is certain that he never could have married a widow. Musidora was the only woman he had ever loved for any length of time; he had yielded to her powerful charms and the poor child's genuine passion. That ardent flame had melted his heart: he loved her, and yet he was unhappy, for the first time in his life. Intolerable recollections pierced his soul like sharp daggers, and frightful bitternesses arose to his lips, even in the midst of their sweetest kisses. He never could forget that her lips had been touched by others.

In this instance he was powerless; he could not wrench Musidora's anterior life from the past to purify it, and this thought haunted him like a phantom. He was so accustomed to exclusive possession that he could scarcely realize that another man existed in the world. When anything reminded him that others might have been loved as he was, he became a prey to a diabolic rage; his frenzy was such that he could have torn lions in two. In those moments he felt a mad desire to mount his horse, dash into the midst of a crowd and slash right and left with his saber; he gnashed his teeth, rolled on the floor, and howled like a madman. It was in one of these paroxysms of jealous rage that he had set fire to Musidora's house.

Outside of this, he was as immovable as an old Turk; the lightning might have come down to light his pipe—he would not have shown the least astonishment; he feared neither God nor the devil, neither death or life, and he was the coolest man in the world.

After his capture by the enchantress Musidora, Fortunio rarely appeared in Eldorado. It was now nearly a week since he had been there, and an intolerable gloom weighed on the glass sky of this little domain. As the inhabitants did not know where they were, all conjectures were impossible. He might have been hunting elephants or at war with some neighboring rajah; brought directly from India, they little suspected that the customs of the country differed from those of Benares or Madras.

Soudja-Sari, sad and anxious, lived in retirement in her apartments with her women. It is to be regretted that none of our artists ever caught a glimpse of Soudja-Sari, for she was the most bewitching creature imaginable, and words, however well combined, give only an imperfect idea of the beauty of a woman.

Although only thirteen, Soudja-Sari might have been taken for fifteen, so well developed was she. Her skin, like the leaf of a camellia, seemed softer to the touch than the interior membrane of an egg; as to the color, certain transparencies of the amber may give you some idea of it. It would be difficult to imagine a more charming picture than this pretty creature, veiled in cascades of wavy hair as black as night; her almond-shaped eyes had an expression of languor and reverie, and the pupils rolled from one corner to the other with a movement so gentle and harmonious that they were irresistible. Soudja-Sari was indeed an appropriate name: when her velvety eyes rested on you, an infinite indolence seemed to invade your heart —a calm full of freshness and perfume, and I know not what of joyous melancholy. The will dissolved, all thought vanished like a vapor, and the only desire that remained was to lie eternally at her feet. All seemed vain and useless, and one felt as if there was nothing to do in this world but to love and sleep.

Nevertheless, Soudja-Sari had passions as violent as the perfumes and poisons of her country. She was of the race of those terrible Javanese—those graceful vampires who suck the blood and gold of a European in three weeks, leaving him as dry as a squeezed lemon.

Her delicate nose, her lips as fresh and red as the cactus flower, the width of her hips, the small hands and feet, all bespoke purity of lineage and remarkable strength.

Fortunio had bought her when she was nine years old, for three oxen; she soon surpassed the other beauties of his harem, and became his favorite. If Fortunio had not been faithful to her, an impossible thing with his Oriental ideas and customs, he had at least always remained constant.

Musidora was the only one for whom he had ever felt so deep and passionate a caprice, and this green-eyed cat was the only one who had ever equaled Soudja in our hero's heart.

Seated on the carpet, Soudja-Sari was looking at herself in a small mirror with a gold handle; four women were braiding her hair and mingling gold threads in the tresses; a fifth, a little further off, was scratching her back gently with a small carved hand of jade fixed at the end of an ivory stick. Keni-Tambouhan and Koukong-Alis were taking robes of precious stuff from cedar chests which served as wardrobes to our princess. They were of black satin with fantastic flowers, having peacock crests for pistils and butterfly wings for petals; fine brocades starred and quilted in brilliant colors; silks more changeable than pigeons' breasts; muslins embroidered in gold and silver; in a word, the wardrobe of a fairy. These rich fabrics were spread on a divan, that Soudja-Sari might make a choice.

Rima-Pahes, whose long hair was coiled around two gold bars ending in silver balls, kneeled before her with an open malachite case filled with jewels.

Soudja-Sari hesitated between a necklace of chrysoberyl and one of azerodrach, but finally decided on a string of pink pearls, which she soon threw aside in favor of a triple row of coral; then, as if worn out by exertion, she leaned against one of her women, her arms falling listlessly at her side, as if completely exhausted; she closed her eyes and allowed her head to fall back; the slaves who had not yet finished the braids, moved quickly forward, but one of them was not prompt enough, and pulled her hair slightly. Soudja-Sari uttered a cry shriller than the hiss of an asp which has been trodden upon, and started up abruptly.

The slave turned pale as she saw her mistress grasp one of the long gold needles from Rima-Pahes' hair; for one of this dear child's habits was to thrust pins into their breasts when they displeased her. However, as the needle did not yield readily, she threw her head back once more and closed her eyes. The slave breathed again, and the charming girl's toilet was completed without further incident.

We shall make an attempt to describe her costume: trousers with gold and black stripes reached from her hips to her ankles; a narrow vest, resembling the strophia, was held with jeweled clasps, and displayed the perfection of her form. This vest was of gold cloth, with designs of flowers in precious stones—the leaves of emeralds, the roses of rubies, and the blue flower of turquoises. It had no sleeves, leaving her two beautifully molded arms bare.

Her hair, as we have already said, was divided into four braids that fell to her feet, two in front and two behind; a camboja flower was placed on each side of her bluish and transparent temples, and in her pearly ears sparkled two scarabees of golden green, in which reflected the richest hues imaginable; an over-tunic of India muslin with golden flowers softened what might have seemed too rich and dazzling in this costume.

Her feet were bare, with a diamond ring on each toe and gold bands around her ankles; and on each arm she wore three bracelets, two near the shoulder, and the other at the wrist.

A pair of delicate slippers, with the points turned up, were placed beside her divan, in case she should wish to go down to the garden—a fancy she rarely indulged in.

Her toilet being finished, she called for her pipe, and began to smoke opium. Rima-Pahes stood at her side and dropped into the porcelain vase, from the point of a silver needle, the pastille that had been melted over a flame of perfumed wood, while Keni-Tabouhan gently waved two large fans of argus pheasant feathers, and the beautiful Cambana, seated on the floor, sang softly, accompanying herself on a triple-stringed guzla.

The bluish aromatic smoke of the opium escaped in light puffs from Soudja-Sari's red lips, and she was falling into a delicious oblivion of everything. Rima-Pahes had already renewed the pastille six times.

"More!" cried Soudja-Sari, with the imperious tone of a spoilt child who would get the moon if she took a fancy to ask for it.

"No, mistress; Fortunio has forbidden you to smoke more than six pipes," said Rima-Pahes as she went out, carrying the precious box containing the intoxicating poison.

"Cruel Rima-Pahes, to take away my opium! I wanted to sleep until the return of my Fortunio. I would at least have seen him in a dream! What is the use of being awake and alive when he is not here? He was never away so long hunting before. What can have happened him? He has perhaps been bitten by a serpent, or wounded by a tiger."

"No, indeed!" said Fortunio, raising the curtain. "It is I who bite the serpents and scratch the tigers!"

At the sound of the well-known voice, Soudja-Sari sprang to her feet with the movement of a startled fawn, and threw herself into his arms.

She clasped her arms around his neck and clung to his lips with the avidity of the traveler who has crossed the desert without a drink; she pressed him against her heart, and coiled around him like a serpent.

"Oh! my lord," she said, "if you knew how I suffered during your absence, and how hard it was to live! You carried away my soul in your last kiss, and did not leave me yours! I was like a corpse or a body in sleep; my tears alone, as they rolled silently down my cheeks, gave evidence that I still lived. When you are not here, O Fortunio of my heart, it seems to me that the sun has vanished from the sky. The brightest lights are black as shadows—all is gloom; you alone are light, movement, and life; outside of you, nothing exists. Oh! I would that I could melt and dissolve myself into your love; I would that I were you, to possess you more entirely!"

"This little girl expresses herself very well in her Hindoostanee; what a pity she knows nothing of French! she would write novels, and make an admirable blue-stocking," thought Fortunio, as he unbraided her hair.

"Will my gracious sultan take a sorbet, chew betel, or drink arrack?

Would he prefer Chinese ginger or prepared nutmeg?" said the Javanese girl, raising her beautiful eyes.

"Have them bring your entire kitchen. I feel the greatest desire of getting abominably drunk. Ken-Tambouhan, you will play the tympanon; Cambana, you may exercise your fingers on your pumpkin with the broom-stick handle, and altogether make enough uproar to deafen the devil. It is long since I have enjoyed myself. While I sing and drink, Rima-Pahes will tickle the soles of my feet with the tip of a peacock feather. Fatme and Zuleika will dance, and then we will have a lion and tiger fight. Whoever is not dead-drunk within two hours will be beheaded or impaled."

A swarm of little slaves, black, yellow, and red, came in, bearing silver platters on the tips of their fingers, and balancing vases on their heads. In three minutes all was ready.

Each group of women had a table, or rather a carpet, loaded with conserves and fruits; the service was done in Oriental style.

Now and then Fortunio scattered dried fruits or gold and silver nuts containing small jewels, and laughed heartily at the scrambles of the beauties to seize them.

Never did the eyes of Greeks rest on more graceful athletes than these.

"Come, don't bite!" cried Fortunio to Kuokong-Alis; "if you make Sicara cry again, I will hang you by the hair. Come here, Sicara; instead of one silver nut, you will have a dozen."

Sicara smiled at Koukong-Alis, who sat gloomy and sullen in her place.

Fortunio filled her skirt with precious fruit, kissed her, and made her sit beside him on the divan.

The two dancers advanced, balancing themselves on their hips, and whirled until they fell, panting and exhausted, on the floor. The lion and tiger fought with such fury that little was left of the two combatants. The arrack and opium did their work so well that not one preserved her reason beyond the allotted time; the rejoicing was complete. Fortunio went to sleep, his head resting on Soudja-Sari's lap.

Musidora awaited him all night, and slept very little.

CHAPTER XXV

NEWS

FORTUNIO must have found himself very comfortable in his golden nest, for Musidora awaited him a whole week in vain.

This was the cause of the sudden rupture: Fortunio realized that there was between Musidora and himself a gulf of inexhaustible bitterness. He considered her charming, intelligent, altogether worthy of love; but he could not forget the past. His retrospective jealousy never slept, and made him unhappy beyond all expression, without contributing in anything to Musidora's happiness. He had made the greatest efforts to crush this thought, but it always arose again more furious and venomous. Seeing that the efforts he made to forget only brought the thought more vividly to his mind, he abandoned the useless struggle. Had he loved Musidora less, he would have kept her; he loved her too well to allow the existence of a secret thought between them.

With his firmness of character, he soon formed a decision—an irrevocable decision.

Musidora received a letter containing a deed conveying to her an income of twenty-five thousand pounds, with a lock of Fortunio's hair, and these words in an unknown hand:

"MADAME: The Marquis Fortunio has just been killed in a duel. Think of him sometimes."

"Ah!" cried Musidora; "he did not come—he must have been dead. I had guessed it; but I will not survive him long."

And without a tear she went in search of the pocket-book in which was the poisoned needle.

Fearing her violent temper, Fortunio had taken it away from her at the beginning of their love; but she had found it again in a casket he had forgotten.

"It was a fatal omen," she said; "and hazard was wise in sending me an instrument of death when I searched for love-letters and the means of forming a frivolous intrigue."

She kissed the lock of hair, and pricked her breast with the point of the needle.

Her eyes closed, the rosy lips turned to pale purple, a shiver ran through her beautiful body.

She was dead.

CHAPTER XXVI

TO THE ORIENT

"MY DEAR RADIN-MANTRI: This letter will precede me by a few days only. I return to India, and will probably never leave it again. You remember how ardently I desired to visit Europe, the country of civilization, as it is called? But may I be struck blind! if I had known what it was, I would not have disturbed myself.

"I am in France at present, a poor country; in Paris, a dirty city, where it is difficult to find proper amusement. To begin with, it rains continually, and the sun only shows himself in a flannel gown and cotton night-cap, like an old man crippled with rheumatism. The trees have very small leaves, and that only three months in the year. For hunting, there is nothing but rabbits, or at the best a few wild boars and emaciated wolves, that have not strength enough to devour a dozen peasants.

"The men are horribly ugly, and the women—oh! and ah! The rich, or those that pass for such, have not even a twenty-five thousand franc-piece in their pocket, and if perchance they take a fancy to back their tilbury into a shop window, or drive over a clown or two, they are obliged to leave their hat as security, or borrow the money from a friend.

"There is a certain class of young men who are called fashionable, and who lead a very singular sort of life. The suit of the most elegant is not worth a thousand francs, and three-quarters of the time it is not paid for. Their supreme refinement consists in wearing patent-leather boots and white gloves. A pair of boots cost forty francs, and gloves from three to five. Titanic luxury! Their clothes are of the same material as those of janitors, salad merchants, and lawyers; it is very difficult to distinguish a nobleman from an English writing-master.

"These gentlemen dine in two or three cafes called fashionable, where anybody can go, and where one runs the risk of sitting side by side with a comedian or a journalist who has just drawn his month's salary, and is making up for a week's abstinence. These cafes are the most abominable eating-houses in the world, where they have nothing you want. If you ask for elephant's feet, or a buffalo hump, they stare at you stupidly, as if you were asking for something extraordinary. There are seldom any scales in their turtle soup, and not a drop of genuine Tokay or Shiraz in their cellar.

"After dinner these fashionable gentlemen go to what they call the opera, a sort of hut of wood and canvas, with faded gildings and daubings, painted with a sufficient magnificence to show acrobatic monkeys and learned asses. It is considered the proper thing to sit in an oblong box between four enormous columns of a repulsive Corinthian style, which are not even of marble. It is impossible to see anything from these boxes, and this is probably why they are in such demand.

"For a long time I wondered what pleasure could be found there. It seems the amusement consists in looking at the dancers' legs, which are usually rather mediocre and covered with padded tights. This does not, however, prevent the old men in the orchestra from polishing their spectacles with great activity.

"The rest of the time they make a frightful uproar under the name of music. The play is always the same, and the verses are written by the worst poets imaginable.

"When there is no opera, they walk, with a cigar between their lips, on a boulevard barely two hundred feet long, without shade or coolness, where there is no place to rest your foot except on that of your neighbor. Or they go to evening parties. These parties are the most incomprehensible pleasures of the civilized men. Four hundred persons crowd into a room scarcely large enough for one hundred. The men dress in black like mourners, and the women wear the strangest costumes in the world: gauzes, ribbons, sham jewelry, the whole worth about fifteen francs. Their dresses, which are invariably cut low, display miserable necks and shoulders. I am not astonished that husbands are not jealous here. The men stand around the walls; the women are seated separately, and no one talks to them but a few bald old men. That abominable invention, the piano, whines sadly in a corner, and the sharp screeching of some renowned singer arises now and then above the din of the crowd. Grooms, or porters disguised as valets, bring in a few cakes and glasses of an insipid mixture, on which everybody pounces with disgusting avidity. The wealthiest people dance themselves, as if they had not the means of paying dancers. You would be much astonished, my good Radin-Mantri, if you saw civilization at close range: civilization consists in having newspapers and railways. Newspapers are big square sheets of paper, scattered about the city every morning, and look as if they were printed with shoe-blacking. They give an account of the events of the city; the drowning of dogs, the beating of wives by their husbands, and a few observations on the state of European politics, written by men who have never learned how to read, and whom we would not take as valets. Railways are iron bars on which they make kettles gallop—an amusing spectacle!

"Besides newspapers and railways, they have a kind of constitutional mechanism, with a king who reigns, but does not govern—do you understand? Whenever this poor devil of a king needs a million, he is obliged to beg it from three hundred provincials, who assemble on the end of a bridge and talk a whole year, without taking into account what the other orators said before them. They respond to a discourse on molasses with a philippic on the fluvial peach.

"Such is European life.

"Their private customs are still more strange: you may call on their wives at any hour of the day or night, and they go to balls with the first comer. Jealousy seems unknown to these people.

"The noblemen of France, generals and diplomates, usually have an opera-dancer for a mistress, who deceives them with barbers, cab-drivers, or negroes. They are fully aware of this, but they do not mind it, instead of sewing them up in bags and throwing them into the river. A singular and almost universal taste in these people is their love for old women. All the adored and fêted actresses are at least sixty; it is only when they near fifty that the world discovers they are talented and pretty.

"As to the condition of art, it is far from brilliant: all the fine paintings in their galleries are by the old masters. There is, however, a poet in Paris, whose name ends in *go*, who writes some passable things; but, after all, I like King Soudraka, the author of 'Vasantesena,' quite as well.

"I did not find much amusement in Europe, and the only agreeable thing I have seen is a little girl called Musidora. I would have liked to carry her off to my harem, but with her European ideas, she would have been very unhappy, and there is nothing I hate so much as to see sad faces around me.

"I shall leave in a few days. I have three vessels ready to carry what is worth taking; I will burn the rest The Eldorado will vanish like a dream; one or two barrels of powder will settle it.

"Farewell, old Europe, who think yourself young; try to invent a machine to manufacture pretty women, and find a new gas to replace the sun. I am going to the Orient; it is more simple."

Mlle. de Maupin

Chapter I

TO A FRIEND

You complain, old friend, of the rarity of my letters. What would you have me tell you, besides the fact that I am in good health, and that I still have the same affection for you? These are facts you know perfectly well, and they are so natural to my own age and the fine qualities you possess that it seems almost ridiculous to make a miserable bit of paper travel a hundred miles to convey nothing more. I have sought in vain, for I have nothing worth telling; my life is the most uninteresting in the world, and nothing occurs to break its monotony. To-day introduces to-morrow, just as yesterday ushered in to-day; and without being so fatuous as to call myself a prophet, I can safely predict in the morning all that will happen to me in the evening.

I spend my day like this: I get up, that being the indispensable commencement of every day; I breakfast, exercise, go out, return home, dine, pay a few calls or do a little reading; then I retire to rest precisely as I did the night before; I go to sleep, and my imagination, not being excited by fresh objects, merely furnishes me with dreams as hackneyed and monotonous as my real life. That is not very amusing, you will observe. But I am accommodating myself better to this sort of existence than I should have done six months ago. I am bored, it is true, but in a tranquil and resigned fashion not entirely lacking in sweetness, and comparable in some respects to those warm and pallid autumn days in which we find a secret charm after the summer's excessive heat.

This life, although I have in appearance accepted it, is scarcely made for me, or at least is very far from resembling the existence of which I dream, and for which I feel myself designed. Perhaps I am mistaken, and am only fit for such a life; but it is difficult for me to come to that conclusion, for if it were my real destiny I should more easily fit into it, nor should I have been sorely wounded by its corners in so many places.

You know what an all-powerful attraction unusual adventures have for me, how I adore anything strange, excessive, or dangerous, and with what avidity I devour novels and stories of travel; perhaps there is not upon the earth a wilder or more vagrant fantasy than mine. Ah well, I know not by what fatality that comes about, for I have never had an adventure, nor have I ever made a journey. For me, the circumnavigation of the world is the tour of the town in which I dwell; I touch my horizon on every side; I jostle with reality. My life is that of the shell-fish on the sand-bank, of the ivy around the tree, of the cricket on the hearth. Truly I am astonished that my feet have not yet taken root.

Love is painted with a bandage over the eyes; Destiny instead should be pictured like that.

I have as my servant a dull, stupid peasant, who has traveled as far as the North Wind; he has been to the Devil, and I don't know where besides; he has seen with his eyes the things of which I form such beautiful ideas, and he takes as much account of them as of a glass of water; he has found himself in the strangest of places, he has experienced the most astonishing adventures it is possible to have. I sometimes make him talk, and I become enraged at the thought that all these fine things have happened to a booby, who is incapable of either feeling or reflection, and who is good for nothing but his own duties, the brushing of clothes and cleaning of boots.

It is clear that this rascal's life ought to have been mine. On his part, he thinks I should be very happy, and displays the greatest astonishment at seeing how sad I am.

All this is not very interesting, poor friend, and is hardly worth the trouble of writing, is it? But, as you absolutely desire me to write to you, I must tell you my thoughts and impressions, and give you the history of my ideas for lack of events or actions to narrate. There will not, perhaps, be much novelty or continuity in what I have to tell; but for that you must blame yourself. You have asked for it.

You are the friend of my youth, I was brought up with you; for a long while we lived the same life, and we are used to the exchange of our inmost thoughts. I can therefore tell you, without blushing, all the nonsense which enters my empty head; I will not add a word, I will not keep back a word, for I have no self-respect where you are concerned. I shall be absolutely exact, even in trifling and not very creditable matters; for certainly you are not the person from whom I ought to conceal my feelings.

Beneath that shroud of nonchalant and depressed boredom of which I spoke to you just now there sometimes moves a thought which is rather torpid than dead, and I have not always that feeling of sweet, sad calm which produces melancholy. I have relapses into my former state of mental disturbance. Nothing in the world is so fatiguing as these motiveless whirlwinds and endless impulses of the mind. On days like these, although I have no more to do than on other days, I rise very early, before sunrise, so busy do I seem to be and without the necessary time at my disposal; I dress myself in great haste, as if the house were on fire, putting on my clothes haphazard and grieving over a minute wasted. Any one who saw me would think that I was going to a lover's rendezvous or on a search for gold. Not at all. I do not even know where I am going, but I must go, and I should consider my safety compromised were I to remain. I seem to hear some one calling me from outside, to see my destiny passing in the street at that moment, and to realize that the question of my life is about to be decided.

I go out with a surprised and bewildered air, my clothing in disorder and my hair badly arranged; the passers-by turn and laugh as they proceed, thinking that I am a young rake who has passed the night at his club or elsewhere. I am, in fact, intoxicated, although I have drunk nothing, and I display all the symptoms, even to an uncertain walk, sometimes slow, sometimes fast. I go from street to street like a dog that has lost its master, looking everywhere, very anxious and wide awake, turning round at the slightest sound, gliding into every group, without noticing the rebuffs of the people I jostle, and staring all about with a clearness of vision I do not possess at other times. Then suddenly it is made clear to me that I am mistaken, that I must go further afield, the other end of the town perhaps. Once more I start off as if the Devil himself were after me. I touch the ground only with the tips of my toes, and do not weigh an ounce. I must indeed look strange with my furious and bewildered expression, and my waving arms as I utter inarticulate cries. When I think of it all in cold blood I laugh heartily in my own face, but please believe that does not prevent me from doing it again on the next occasion.

If I were asked the reason of my rushing hither and thither in this fashion, I should certainly be very puzzled to give an answer. I am not in haste to reach my destination, as I have none. I am not afraid of being late, as I have no appointment to keep. Nobody expects me, nor have I any reason to hasten.

Is it a love affair, an adventure, a woman, an idea, or a fortune, a something lacking in my own life, which I am unwittingly seeking, urged on by a dim instinct? Is it my own existence which desires to be completed? Is it a longing to leave my home and change my personality, or ennui at my own position and desire for a change? It is something of all that, perhaps all of it together. Still it is always a very unpleasant state of mind, a febrile irritation which is usually succeeded by the most languid debility.

I often have the impression that if I had started an hour earlier, or doubled my speed, I should have arrived in time; or that while I traversed one street, the person I sought passed along the next, and that a block in the traffic had sufficed to make my pursuit futile. You cannot imagine into what sorrow and despair I sink when I see that it all ends in failure, that my youth is passing without any perspective opening up before me; then all my disengaged passions mutter sullenly in my heart, and, lacking other food, devour each other like the animals of a menagerie when their keeper has forgotten to feed them. In spite of my daily suppressed disappointments, there is something in me which resists and does not wish to die. I have no hope, for to hope a desire is needed, as well as a certain propensity to wish events to shape themselves in one way rather than another. I do not desire anything, for I desire everything; I do not hope, or rather I have ceased to hope; it is absolutely the same to me whether a thing is or is not. I wait for—what? I do not know, but I still expect.

Mine is a fluttering state of expectancy, full of impatience, interrupted by starts and nervous motions, like the condition of a lover waiting for his mistress. Nothing happens; I return home in a rage or burst into tears. I am waiting for the heavens to open, for an angel to descend and make a revelation to me that a revolution is in progress and offers me a throne, that a Raphael virgin is stepping out of her canvas and coming to embrace me, that relations of mine—who do not exist—have died and left me wealth enough to float my fantasies upon a river of gold, or that a hippogriff has seized me and borne me away to an unknown land. But whatever it is I expect, it is most certainly nothing ordinary or usual.

This feeling even goes so far that, when I return home, I never fail to say, "Has any one been here? Is there any letter for me, or anything fresh?" I know perfectly well there is nothing, there can be nothing. All the same, I am still very surprised and disappointed when I receive the usual answer: "No, sir, absolutely nothing."

Sometimes, on rare occasions, the idea is more precise. It becomes condensed into a beautiful woman, whom I do not know, and who does not know me, though we have met at the theater or in church, where she may not have taken the least bit of notice of me. I traverse the whole house, and till I have opened the door of the last room—I dare hardly tell you this, so mad does it seem—I hope she has come, and is there. It is not conceit on my part. I am so little self-conscious that several women are very favorably disposed towards me, so I hear from others, women whom I considered quite indifferent to me, and never particularly impressed with my conversation.

When I am not stupefied by ennui and discouragement, my soul awakens and resumes all its former vigor. I hope, love, desire, and my desires are so violent that I think they must attract like a magnet of great power. That is why I await the things I desire, instead of going to seek them, and I often enough neglect facilities which seem favorable to my hopes. Another person would write a loving note to the divinity of his heart, or seek an opportunity to approach her. I ask the messenger for an answer to a letter I have not written, and spend my time in creating in my head the most wonderful situations in which to present myself to the woman I love in the most unusual and favorable light. The plans I devise for introducing myself to her and laying bare my passion would make a larger and more ingenious book than the stratagems of Polybious. It would often suffice for me to say to one of my friends, "Present me to that lady," and then complete the acquaintance with a mythological compliment punctuated with glances.

After hearing all this, you will think me a suitable subject for restraint; I am, however, a reasonable enough fellow, and I have not converted many of my foolish ideas into actions. All that takes place in the hollow of my mind, and all these absurd ideas are very carefully hidden away; from outside nothing is visible, and I have the reputation of being a cool and quiet young man, not fond of women, and indifferent to the pleasures of my age; now this reputation is as far from the truth as are usually the judgments of the world.

But, in spite of all my rebuffs, some of my desires have been realized, and from the small amount of joy their accomplishment has caused me, I have come to fear the realization of the others. You remember the childish ardor with which I desired to possess a horse of my own? Just lately my mother has given me one. He is black as ebony with a little white star on his forehead, a mane, shining coat, and fine limbs, just as I desired. When I first received him I had such a shock that for a quarter of an hour I was quite pale; then I mounted, and without saying a word, I went for a good gallop across country, which lasted more than an hour, in a state of rapture hard to imagine. I did the same every day for more than a week, and I really do not know how I failed to lame or break him down. But bit by bit my eagerness abated. I trotted my horse, then walked him, and then I got to ride him so nonchalantly that he often stopped without my noticing it; pleasure became converted into habit much more quickly than I could have believed possible. As for Farragus, that is the name I gave him, he is the most charming animal in the world, fleet as a stag and gentle as a lamb. You shall have the pleasure of a gallop on him when you come here. And although my passion for riding has decreased, I am still very fond of him, for he is a horse of a fine disposition, and I infinitely prefer him to most people. If you knew how joyfully he neighs when I go to see him in his stable and with what intelligent eyes he looks at me! I admit that I am touched by these marks of affection, and I put my arms round his neck and kiss him as tenderly as if he were a beautiful girl.

I had, too, another desire, more keen, burning, ever present, and cherished, upon which, in my soul, I had built a delightful castle of cards and palace of fancies, one often destroyed, but always rebuilt with despairing persistence. It was a desire to have a mistress, a mistress quite my own, like the horse. I do not know if the realization of this dream would have as promptly found me cold as did the realization of the other; I doubt it. But perhaps I am wrong, and should have quickly wearied of her. Through my curious disposition, I desire so frantically what I do desire, without doing anything to procure it, that if by chance, or in any other way, I attain my object, I have so great a moral lassitude, and am so harassed, that I suffer from exhaustion, and have no longer the strength to enjoy it. So things which come to me without any longing on my part for them usually give me more pleasure than those I have most earnestly desired.

I am twenty-two; I am not an innocent. Alas! nobody is nowadays at that age, either in body or in heart, which is worse. Besides those women who provide pleasure for payment, and who no more count than an evil dream, I have enjoyed here and there, in some out-of-the-way spot or another, a few honest, or very nearly honest women, neither beautiful nor ugly, neither young nor old, taking advantage of the opportunities which present themselves to easy-going young fellows whose hearts are free. With a little good-will and a large dose of romantic illusions, a fellow calls one of them a mistress if he pleases. But in my case that is impossible, for I might have a thousand of that sort, and I should still consider my desire as far from fulfillment as ever.

I have not yet had a mistress, and my great desire is to have one. It is an idea which strangely worries me! it is neither the effervescence of temperament, hot blood, nor the first burst of puberty. It is not the woman I desire, it is a woman, a mistress. I desire one and I will have one; if I do not succeed, I must admit, my failure will have a discouraging influence on the rest of my life. I should consider myself a failure in one direction, incomplete, and deformed in mind or heart; for my demand is a just one, and nature owes it to every man. If I were not to succeed in my object, I should look upon myself as a child, and I should lack the self-confidence I ought to possess. A mistress to me is the same thing as the *toga virilis* was to a young Roman.

I see so many men, who are ignoble in every respect, with beautiful wives whose lackeys they are hardly worthy to be, that a blush mounts to my cheek for them, and also for myself. It gives me a contemptible opinion of women, to see them infatuated with cads who despise and deceive them, rather than give themselves to some sincere and loyal young fellow, who would consider himself very fortunate, and adore them on his bended knees—myself, for example. It is quite true that the former are the men who haunt drawing-rooms, strut about or loll over the back of a couch, while I stay indoors with my forehead against the window-pane, watching the mist rise from the river, as I silently raise up in my heart the perfumed sanctuary, the marvelous temple in which lodge the future idol of my soul. It is a chaste and poetic occupation, but one for which women have the least possible liking.

Women have very little taste for the contemplative and a singular regard for those who turn their ideas into actions. After all, they are not far wrong. Obliged by their education and social position to keep silent and wait, they naturally prefer men who come to them and speak, for they rescue them from a false and awkward position. I see all that; but never in my life could I take upon myself, as I see many men do, to get up from my seat, walk across a drawing-room, go up suddenly to a woman and say, "Your dress is quite angelic," or "Your eyes are wonderfully bright to-night."

But all that does not alter the fact that a mistress is necessary to me. I do not know who she is to be, but I do not see, among the women I know, one who could properly fill that dignified position. In them I find only too few of the qualities I require. Those who are young enough are neither sufficiently beautiful nor accomplished; those who are young and beautiful are ignoble and repulsive in their vice, or else lack the necessary liberty; and then there is always some brother, some husband, or some aunt with large eyes and ears, to be coaxed or thrown out of the window. Every rose has its thorn, every woman her crowd of relatives to be cleared away, if a man desires one day to pluck the fruit of her beauty. Even the second cousins in the country, whom one has never seen, wish to maintain, in all its whiteness, the immaculate purity of their dear cousin. That is nauseous, and I should never have the patience necessary to uproot all the weeds and cut away all the briars which fatally obstruct the approaches to a pretty woman.

I do not like mothers, and I like little girls less. I must also admit that married women have only a very mild attraction for me. There is something revolting to me in a love affair with a woman who has a husband. The woman who has a husband and a lover is a courtesan to one of the two, and often to both; and besides, I could not consent to yield my place to another. My natural pride would not know how to bow to such humiliation. I would never go because another man was expected. Even were the woman to be compromised and lost, and the two men to fight with knives, each with a foot upon her body, I would remain. Secret stairs, wardrobes, closets, and all the appliances of adultery would be a poor expedient to me.

I am very little attracted by what is called virgin candor, innocence, purity of heart, and the other charming things which have such a beautiful effect in verse; I call all that nonsense, ignorance, imbecility, or hypocrisy. That virgin candor which consists of sitting on the edge of a couch with the arms pressed against the body, the eye upon the point of the corset, and speaking only after obtaining permission from grandparents; the innocence which has the monopoly of straight hair and white dresses, the pureness of heart which wears high corsages because the beauty of the neck and shoulders is not yet developed, do not really give me great pleasure.

I do not care for them sufficiently to spell the alphabet of love to the little simpletons. I am neither old enough nor corrupt enough to take much pleasure in them; besides, I should meet with very little success, for I have never been able to expound a subject, even one with which I am well acquainted, to any one. I prefer women who read fluently, for then the end of the chapter is reached all the more quickly; and in all things, in love most of all, the end is the thing most worthy of consideration. In this respect I am something like those people who read a book backwards, turning first of all to the end, and then, if necessary, going back to the beginning. This fashion of reading and loving has its charm. The reader enjoys details better when his mind is easy as to the end of the story; reversing the order leads to the unexpected.

Now little girls and married women have been excluded from the category. Therefore, our divinity must be selected from among the widows. Alas! I am very much afraid, although it is the last resort, that I shall not yet find what I seek among them.

If I were to love one of those pale narcissi, bathed in a warm dew of tears, who lean with melancholy grace upon the new marble tomb of a husband happily and recently deceased, I should most certainly and in a very short time be as unhappy as the defunct spouse in his lifetime. Widows, however young and charming they may be, have one great drawback which other wives have not. Should any small cloud appear in the sky of love, they tell you at once, with a superlatively contemptuous air: "Ah, to-day you are just like my late husband used to be; when we quarreled he used to say just the same; it is very strange that you should have a similar tone in your voice and the same look; when you lose your temper you would not believe how you resemble my late husband; there is quite a terrifying likeness." That is a pleasant sort of thing to be told to one's face! There are some even who extend their impudence as far as to praise the departed in the manner of an epitaph, and to extol his heart and limbs at the expense of your own. At least, in the case of wives who have only had one or several lovers, a husband has the inestimable advantage of never hearing his predecessor mentioned, and that is no slight consideration. Women have too great a regard for the proprieties not to remain scrupulously silent under such circumstances, and all such affairs are relegated to obscurity as soon as possible. It is quite understood that a man is always a woman's first lover.

I do not think that there is any argument to oppose to such a well-founded aversion. It is not that I find widows without any attraction when they are young and pretty, and have not left off their mourning. They have little languishing airs, ways of letting their arms droop, bending their necks, and bridling up like a dove bereft of its mate; a number of charming mannerisms are softly veiled beneath crape's transparency, such as the coquetry of despair, sighs adroitly uttered, and tears which fall so opportunely, and leave the eyes so bright! Truly, next to wine, even if not before it, the liquor I love best to drink is a beautiful tear, clear and limpid, trembling upon the tip of blonde or dark lash. What resistance can be opposed to it? None; besides, black suits women so well! The white skin, a poesy apart, turns to ivory, snow, milk, and alabaster. Mourning is good fortune to a woman, and the reason I shall never marry is for fear my wife may have to wear mourning for me. There are women, of course, who do not know how to make the best of their grief, and weep so that they make their noses red, and distort their features. That is a great danger. A woman requires much charm and art to weep agreeably; without it she runs the risk of being long without consolation. But, however great may be the pleasure of making some Artemisia unfaithful to the shade of her Mausolus, I shall not choose from among the host of the bereft a woman to ask for her heart in exchange for mine.

I can almost hear you say, "Who then will you have? You will neither have young girls, married women, nor widows. You do not like mothers, so I presume you have no great affection for grandmothers. Whom do you really love?" Up till now I have never loved any woman, but I have loved and still love "Love." Although I have not had a mistress, and the women with whom I have had love affairs have only inspired me with desire, I have felt and I can recognize real love. I did not love this woman or that, one rather than the other, but some one I have never seen, though she must exist somewhere, whom I shall find, please God. I know very well what she is like, and when I meet her I shall recognize her.

I have very often pictured to myself the place where she dwells, the costume she wears, her eyes and hair. I can hear her voice; I shall recognize her walk in a thousand, and if by chance her name is spoken I shall turn; it is impossible for her not to have one of the five or six names I have given her in my dreams.

She will be twenty-six, neither more nor less.

She will not be innocent, nor yet blasé. That is a charming age for love-making without puerility or licentiousness. She will be of medium height; I do not care for giants or dwarfs. I wish to be able to bear my beauty from the sofa to the bed; but it would displease me to find her there. Her mouth, when she stands on tiptoe, must be within reach of my kiss. She must have a good figure, rather plump than thin. I have somewhat Turkish ideas on that point, and I should not care to meet a bone where I expected a curve; a woman's skin should be full, and her flesh hard and firm like an unripe peach; that is exactly how the mistress I shall have will be made. She will be fair with black eyes, fair as a blonde and dark as a brunette, with something red and sparkling in her smile. Her lower lip will be a little full, her throat small and round, her wrists fine, her hands long and plump, her walk undulating like a snake poised upon its tail, her hips strong and mobile, her shoulders broad, and the back of her neck covered with down. She will be a sort of beauty at the same time fine and strong, elegant and vivacious, poetic and real, a Rubens picture.

I would not adorn her with a ring or a bracelet. Her dress must be literally velvet or brocade; I could hardly permit her to descend to satin. I prefer to rumple a silk skirt rather than a cloth one, and to make fall from a head pearls or feathers rather than natural flowers or a simple bow. I know that the lining of the cloth skirt is often as appetizing as that of the silk one; but I prefer the silk skirt. So, in my dreams, I have given myself as mistresses, many queens, empresses, princesses, sultanas, and celebrated courtesans, but never poor women or shepherdesses; and in my most vagabond desires I have never thought of the green sward of the bed of poverty. I consider beauty a diamond to be mounted and encased in gold. I cannot conceive a beautiful woman without carriages, horses, servants, and all the attributes of wealth; there is harmony between beauty and riches. One demands the other; a pretty foot calls for a beautiful shoe, and that, in turn, needs a handsome carpet, a carriage, and their attributes. A beautiful woman with poor clothes in an ugly house is, to my mind, the most painful spectacle it is possible to behold, and I could have no love for her. It is only the rich and beautiful who can be amorous without being ridiculous or pitiable. On this reckoning few people would have the right to be lovers. I myself should first of all be excluded; still, that is my opinion.

We shall meet for the first time in the evening, at the time of a beautiful sunset; the sky will have those orange yellow and pale green tints sometimes seen in pictures by the great masters of the past; there will be a fine avenue of chestnut trees in flower, and ancient elms, the home of the wood-pigeon, beautiful trees of fresh dark green, casting shadows full of mystery and moisture; that, with a few statues, some marble vases standing out from the green background with the whiteness of snow, a sheet of water where the familiar swan disports itself, and, right in the distance, a mansion of brick and stone, of the Henry IV period, with a roof of pointed slates, lofty chimneys, a weathercock on every gable, and long narrow windows, will complete the scene. At one of these windows will sorrowfully lean on the balcony the queen of my soul in the attire I have just described; behind her will stand a little negro boy holding her fan and parrot. You see there is nothing lacking, and it is all perfectly absurd. The beauty will drop her glove; I shall pick it up, kiss it, and restore it to her. A conversation will ensue; I shall display all the cleverness I do not possess; I shall utter charming phrases and receive suitable replies; the conversation will become a luminous shower of dazzling words. In short, I shall be adorable and adored. As the time for supper approaches I shall be invited to share the meal; I shall accept. What a supper, my old friend, and what a menu my imagination has supplied! Wine will sparkle in the glasses, a white and gold pheasant will smoke upon a crested dish. The meal will be prolonged far into the night, and you may imagine I shall not be the person to bring it to an end. Is not that a fine effort of the imagination? Nothing in the world is more simple, and really it is very surprising that it has not happened ten times rather than once.

Sometimes the scene is laid in a mighty forest. The hunt is passing; the horn is heard, the pack give tongue and cross the ride like a flash of lightning; the beautiful Amazon is mounted upon a Turkish horse, white as milk and frisky. Although she is an excellent horsewoman, her mount rears, prances, and she has the greatest difficulty in the world in controlling him; he takes the bit between his teeth and gallops straight towards a precipice. I drop from the clouds at exactly the right moment; I stop the horse, catch in my arms the fainting princess, I restore her to consciousness, and escort her back to her mansion. What well-born woman would refuse her heart to a man who risked his life for her. None; and gratitude is a cross road which very quickly leads to love.

You will agree that when I romance I do not do so by halves, and that I am as mad as it is possible to be. That is so, and there is nothing in the world more disagreeable than reasonable madness. You must also admit that when I write letters they are more like volumes than simple notes. In everything I love the unusual. That is why I love you. Don't laugh too loudly at all the nonsense I have written to you; I have cast aside the pen for action, for I have got back to my original text. I desire a mistress. I am not aware whether she will be the lady of the park or the lady of the balcony, but I bid you good-by to go in search of her. My mind is made up. Wherever she may conceal herself I shall find her out. I will let you know the success or non-success of my enterprise. I hope I shall be successful: let me have your good wishes, old friend. I have dressed in my best, and made up my mind to go out and not come back without a mistress to suit my taste.

I have dreamed enough; now for action.

P. S.—Let me have news of little D. What has become of him? No one here knows anything of him; give my compliments to your worthy brother and all the family.

Chapter II

LADY IN RED

Well, old friend, I have returned home after my wanderings; but I must admit that I am still without a mistress. After taking myself by the hand and swearing that I would go to the end of the world, I have only been to the end of the town.

I must tell you the story of my expedition, for it is well worth narrating. I spent two long hours over my toilet, and really did not look at all bad. So, after carefully inspecting myself in the mirror in various lights, to see if I was good-looking enough and had a sufficient gallant air, I resolutely sallied forth with my head in the air, wearing the real conquering manner.

I was like a second Jason setting forth to the conquest of a golden fleece. But alas! Jason was more fortunate than I; he made the conquest of a beautiful princess as well as the fleece, while I did neither.

I went through the streets gazing at the women and examining them more closely, if they seemed worth the trouble. Some assumed an exceedingly virtuous air and passed by without lifting their eyes. Others seemed astonished at first, and then, if they had beautiful teeth, smiled. Some turned round after a time to look at me, when they thought I was no longer watching them, and blushed as our eyes met. The weather was fine, there was a crowd upon the promenade. But I must admit, in spite of all the respect I bear that half of the human race entitled the "fair sex," that the majority of them are devilishly ugly; hardly one in a hundred is passable. What expressions too, of envy, evil curiosity, greed, and coquetry, were to be seen upon their faces! For a woman who is not beautiful is more ugly than a man who is not handsome!

I saw no one pretty, except a few grisettes; but as they were not of the "silk skirt" class I had no concern with them. In sooth, I think that man, including woman, is the ugliest animal on earth. A lion and tiger are more beautiful than man, and in their species many individual animals attain to all possible beauty.

I am very much afraid, old friend, I shall never be able to attain my ideal, although there is nothing extraordinary or unnatural about it. It is an ideal almost plebeian in its simplicity, and I think that with a bag or two of piastres I should find it quite realizable in the first bazaar I came across in Constantinople or Smyrna; it would probably cost me less than a horse or well-bred dog; but the thought that I shall not succeed, for that is my opinion, is very annoying, and I returned home in a very fine rage against fate.

You, who are not as mad as I, are happy, for you have accepted your life and take things as you find them. You have not sought happiness, and it has come to find you; you are loved and you love. I do not envy you; at least don't think that; but I find myself less glad in thinking of your happiness than I ought to be, and I tell myself with a sigh that I should like to enjoy similar felicity.

Perhaps my happiness passed me by, and, blind that I am, I did not see it; perhaps the voice spoke, but the noise of my own tempest drowned it.

Perchance I have been loved obscurely by a humble heart which I have misinterpreted or broken; perhaps I have been the ideal of another, the dream of a night and the thought of a day. If I had looked down, perhaps I should have seen a beautiful Madeleine, with moistened hair and a vessel of perfume. I may have passed with my arms lifted up to heaven in an endeavor to capture the gleaming stars which evaded me, and disdained to pluck the little daisy which opened its heart of gold amid the dew and grass. I have committed a great fault. I have asked love for something else than love, and for a thing it cannot give. I have forgotten that love is naked, and I have not realized the sense of this magnificent symbol. I have demanded brocade dresses, feathers, diamonds, a sublime intelligence, knowledge, poesy, beauty, youth, and supreme power, things quite apart; for love can only offer itself, and the persons who desire to draw aught else from it are not worthy of being loved.

Without a doubt I am too hasty; my time is not yet come. God who has loaned me life will not snatch it away before I have lived. What use to a poet is a lyre without strings, to man a life without love? God cannot commit such an inconsistency, and, without a doubt, at the desired moment He will put upon my path the woman I must love and by whom I shall be loved. But why has love come to me before the mistress! Why am I thirsty without having a fountain at which to quench my thirst? or why cannot I fly, like the birds of the desert, to the place where water is to be found? The world to me is a Sahara without wells and date palms. I have not in my life a single shady corner in which to shelter from the sun; I suffer all the ardor of passion without its ecstasy and ineffable delight; I know its torments, but I do not enjoy its pleasures. I am jealous of that which does not exist; I shed tears which fall to the earth without being wiped away; I give to the wind kisses which are not returned to me; I wait for that which does not come, and I anxiously count the hours as if I had a rendezvous.

Whatever you may be, angel or demon, virgin or courtesan, shepherdess or princess, whether you, the woman I do not know and love, come from the North or the South, do not keep me waiting any longer, or the flame will burn the altar, and you will find in place of my heart nothing but a piece of cold cinder! Come, woman whom I am to love, that I may enclose you in my arms, which have been open so long!

If you come too late, my ideal, I shall no longer have the strength to love you; my soul is like a dovecote full of doves. At every hour of the day some desire flies away from it. The doves return to the dovecote, but desires do not return to the heart. Hasten your footsteps, my dream, or all that will remain in the empty nest will be the feathers of the departed birds.

Old friend, companion of my youth, you are the only one to whom I can tell these things. Write to me that you pity me and do not consider me splenetic; console me, for I have never before had such need of it; how much to be envied are those who have a passion they can satisfy! The drunkard, the sensualist, and the gambler can all assuage their passions or distract themselves, but in my case either is quite impossible.

This idea has so taken possession of me that I have ceased to regard art, and poetry has little charm for me now; my former delights make the least impression upon me now.

I begin to think that I am not in my right senses, and am asking of nature and society more than they can give. The object of my search may not exist, and I must not complain because I cannot find it. But if the woman of whom I dream is not of flesh and blood, why is it that I love her, and not others, since I am a man, and my instinct ought to direct me in an unmistakable way? Who has given me the idea of this imaginary woman? What, then, is this abstract beauty I feel and cannot define? Why, in the presence of a woman often quite charming, do I sometimes say that she is beautiful, while I think her very ugly? Where then is the model, the type, the internal pattern which serves me as a comparison? For beauty is not an absolute idea, and can only be appreciated by contrast. Have I seen it in the sky, in a star, at a ball, under a mother's wing, in Italy or Spain, here or there, yesterday or long ago? Is she the beloved courtesan, the famous singer, or the princess? Is it Raphael who painted the face which pleases me, or Cleomenes who has polished the marble I adore? Is the mistress a Madonna or a Diana? Is the ideal an angel, a sylph, or a woman?

Alas! the ideal is a little of them all; but how can a real woman, eating and drinking, rising in the morning and going to bed at night, however graceful and adorable she may be, bear comparison with such a creature! It is not reasonable to hope she can do so, but while we hope we seek. What strange blindness it is! It is either sublime or absurd. How I pity and admire those who pursue through it all the reality of their dream, and die content provided that once they have kissed their chimera upon the mouth! But what a frightful fate is that of the lover who has not found his mistress!

Ah, if I were a poet, it is to those whose existence has been a failure, whose arrows have not reached their mark, who have died without uttering the words they had to say and without pressing the hand destined for them, to all who have loved without being loved, who have suffered without being pitied, that I would consecrate my verses; it would be a noble task.

Now all this is very far from our subject, old friend, but the story is such a poor one that I am forced to have recourse to digressions and reflections. I hope that it will not be always thus, and that before long the history of my life will be more entangled and complicated than a Spanish imbroglio.

After wandering from street to street, I made up my mind to call on a friend who would introduce me to a house where, I had been told, all the pretty women were to be seen; a collection of ideals in real life sufficient to satisfy twenty poets. There are beauties to suit all tastes, for the house is a real seraglio without the eunuchs. My friend tells me that he has already had five or six love affairs there, but I am afraid that I shall not have similar success, though my friend pretends I shall, and even be more favored than I desire. I have, according to him, but one fault in society, which age will correct, and that is thinking too much of the woman and not enough of women. There may be, too, some truth in it. He says I shall be perfectly lovable when I have got rid of this little failing. May it be so! It is necessary for women to feel that I despise them; for a compliment they would consider charming and adorable from the mouth of another angers and displeases them from mine as much as the most biting epigram. That, probably, has some connection with my friend's reproaches.

My heart beat as I ascended the staircase, and I had hardly mastered my emotion when my friend, nudging me with his elbow, brought me face to face with a woman of about thirty, who was passably good-looking and dressed luxuriously, though with an extremely pretentious and childish simplicity, which did not prevent her from being plastered with red like a carriage-wheel. She was the lady of the house.

C., assuming the mocking and shrill voice, so different from his usual tones, which he uses in society when he wishes to pose as a charmer, began with a great show of ironical respect, through which the most profound contempt could be discerned, half aloud, half in a whisper: "This is the young man I mentioned to you the other day, a fellow of great attainments; he is well bred, and I feel sure you will be glad to welcome him; that is the reason I have taken the liberty of bringing him."

"Certainly, sir, you have done quite right," the lady replied, simpering in a most extravagant fashion. Then she turned to me, and after looking me up and down, out of the corner of her eye, in a way that made me blush up to my ears, said, "You can consider yourself as invited once and for all, sir, and come as often as you have an evening to spare."

I bowed, awkwardly enough, and murmured a few incoherent words, not likely to give her a great idea of my abilities; then, other people arriving, I was delivered from the boredom inseparable from presentation. C. drew me into a corner by the window and began to instruct me.

"Well, you are a fine fellow! You will compromise me. I described you as a mental phenomenon, a man with a frenzied imagination, a lyrical poet of the most transcendent and passionate order, and you stand there like a blockhead without uttering a word! What a poor effort! I thought you were a little more prolific. Come, let loose the bridle of your tongue; babble something. There is no need to make sensible and judicious remarks—on the other hand, they would be detrimental to you; but it is quite essential to talk; say a great deal and make it last; attract attention to yourself; cast aside all fear and modesty; get well into your head the fact that all present are fools, or almost, and do not forget that an orator who wants to succeed cannot despise his audience too much. What do you think of the mistress of the house?"

"She displeases me considerably, already; and although I spoke to her for barely a minute, I was almost as bored as if I had been her husband."

"Ah! is that your opinion of her?"

"Yes."

"So your dislike to her is quite insurmountable? So much the worse; it would have been the correct thing for you to have been her lover for at least a month, and a young man cannot be better launched into society than by her."

"Ah well! I will make the best of it," I replied in pitiful tones, "since it is necessary; but must I also pretend to be in earnest?"

"Alas, yes; that is quite indispensable, and I will explain the reason. Madame de Thémines is now in the fashion; she has all the mannerisms of the day to a superior degree and sometimes those of to-morrow, but never those of yesterday; she is quite up-to-date. People wear what she wears, but she never wears what has been worn. Besides, she is rich, and her carriages are in the best of taste. She has no mind, but a great deal of chatter; she has very vigorous tastes and little passion. She can be pleased, but not touched, for her heart is cold, though she has a licentious head. As for her soul, if she has one, which is doubtful, it is very black, and there is no spite and unkindness of which she is not capable; but she is extremely clever, and preserves appearances so far as it is necessary, so that nothing can be proved against her. For that reason she will have a love affair with a man though she will not write him the simplest of notes. On this account, her enemies most familiar with her ways can find nothing to say against her except that she puts on her rouge too thickly, and that certain parts of her person are not actually as round as they appear to be—that is false."

"How do you know?"

"What a question! How do we find out such things, except by personal observation?"

"So you have been her lover?"

"Certainly! Why not? It would have been most unseemly of me not to have done so. She has done me great services, and I am very grateful to her."

"I do not understand the kind of services she can have rendered you?"

"Are you really a fool?" C. then said, looking at me with a most comical expression. "I am beginning to think so; must I then tell you everything? Madame de Thémines professes, and quite rightly so, to have special information from certain places, and a young man whom she has taken under her wing for a time can boldly present himself anywhere, and be quite sure that he will not be long without a love affair, and often have two rather than one. Beyond this outstanding advantage, another almost as great is that when society women see that you are the acknowledged lover of Madame de Thémines, even if they have not the slightest liking for you, they look upon it as a pleasure and a duty to take you away from a fashionable woman like her, and instead of having to make advances and overtures, you will have quite an embarrassing choice, and become the target of every possible encouragement and attention. But if she inspires you with such repugnance, do not attempt the conquest. You are not precisely obliged to do so, though it would have been polite and expedient to have done so. But quickly make a choice and lay siege to the heart of the woman who pleases you most, or seems to offer the greatest facilities, for, if you do not, you will lose the benefit of novelty and the advantage that gives you for a few days over all the other suitors here. All these ladies have no conception of passions born in intimacy, and developed slowly in respect and silence. They are fonder of lightning wooings and occult sympathies, and these are marvelously well designed to do away with the boredom of resistance, and all those repetitions and delays which sentiment introduces into the romance of love, and which only serve to unnecessarily postpone its consummation. These ladies are very economical with their time, and it appears to them so precious that they would be in the depths of despair were a single moment of it to be left unemployed. They have a longing to oblige mankind which cannot be too highly praised, and they love their neighbor as themselves—another perfectly gospel-like and meritorious trait; they are very charitable creatures, who would not on any account cause the death of a man through despair.

"Three or four of them already seem to be favorably impressed by you, and I should, in a friendly way, advise you to press home the attack, instead of amusing yourself by standing chattering to me at a window, for that will not advance your position much."

"But, my dear C., I am quite new to all this, and have not the ability to distinguish at a glance whether a woman is favorably impressed with me or not; and I might commit some curious blunders, if you did not assist me with your experience."

"Really, you are unutterably primitive, and I would not have thought it possible for a man to be so pastoral and bucolic in the century in which we are privileged to live! What use do you make of your pair of big black eyes, which would have a most killing effect if you only knew how to use them properly. Look at the little woman in red in the corner near the fire place, playing with her fan. She has been ogling you for the last quarter of an hour with significant intensity. She has such a superior way of being indecent, and displays such noble effrontery. She displeases the other women very much, for they despair of reaching the lofty pinnacle of impudence that she has attained; but, on the other hand, she is a great favorite with the men, who find that she possesses all the piquancy of a courtesan. Her depravity is really very charming, for she is clever, spirited, and capricious. She is an excellent mistress for a young man with prejudices. In a week she will rid your conscience of every scruple and corrupt your heart so that you will never again be ridiculous or elegiac. She has on all subjects inexpressibly positive ideas; she goes to the root of things with quite astonishing rapidity and certainty. This little woman is algebra incarnate;

she is just the thing for a dreamer and an enthusiast. She will soon correct your lazy idealism, and, in so doing, will render you a great service. She will do it, too, with the greatest of pleasure, for the disenchantment of poets is an instinct with her."

My curiosity being aroused by C.'s description, I left my retreat, and making my way between the various groups, approached the lady and took careful stock of her. She was about twenty-five or twenty-six. She was short, but well proportioned, although somewhat inclined to plumpness; she had a white, fat arm, and a fine hand, with a pretty, though not too tiny, foot; her shoulders were plump and gleaming, and her throat was small, but very satisfying, and giving a good idea of the rest of her person. Her hair was of an extremely brilliant blue-black, like the wings of a jay; her nose was small, with the nostrils wide open, her mouth moist and sensual, and she had a little line upon her lower lip. With it all was a life, animation, health, strength, and something of an expression of luxury, cleverly tempered by coquetry and intrigue, which made her a most desirable creature, and justified, or more than justified, the passions she had inspired and did arouse every day.

I liked her, but I nevertheless realized that this woman, agreeable though she was, would not realize my desire and make me say, "At last I have a mistress!"

I went back to C. and said, "The lady pleases me, and perhaps I may come to an understanding with her. But before committing myself, I should be greatly obliged if you would point out to me the other indulgent beauties who did me the honor to be favorably impressed with me, so that I may make my choice. It will be doing me a great favor if, as you are my instructor here, you will add a short notice of each, mention their faults and good qualities, instruct me in the way I should attack them and the tone I should adopt with them, so that I may not appear too much like a provincial or a literary man."

"I am quite agreeable," C. replied. "Do you see that beautiful, sorrowful swan, bending her neck so harmoniously and moving her sleeves like wings; she is modesty personified, and everything chaste and virginal in the world; she has a forehead of snow, a heart of ice, the glances of a Madonna, the smile of an Agnes, a white robe, and a soul of the same color; she wears in her hair nothing but orange blossoms or water-lily leaves, and is only kept down to earth by a thread. She has never had a bad thought, and is profoundly ignorant of the way in which a man differs from a woman. The Holy Virgin is a Bacchante compared with her, but that does not prevent her from having more lovers than any woman I know, and really that is not saying a little. Examine the discreet lady's throat; it is a little masterpiece, and really it is difficult to show as much while hiding more; tell me if, with all her restrictions and prudery, she is not ten times more indecent than the good lady on her left, who bravely displays two hemispheres which, if they were joined together, would form a globe of the natural size, or the other on her right, with her dress cut so low that she is displaying her person with charming intrepidity. This virginal creature, unless I am very much mistaken, has already calculated in her head the promises of love and passion in your pallor and black eyes; and the reason I have for saying so is that she has not once looked in your direction—at least, not to all appearances, for she can use her eyes so skilfully, and look out of the corners so cleverly, that nothing escapes her; you would think she could see out of the back of her head, for she knows quite well what is going on behind her. She is a female Janus. If you want to succeed with her, you must eschew a familiar, overbearing manner. You must speak to her without looking at her, without a movement, in a contrite attitude, and in respectful and subdued tones; in this way you can tell her what you please, provided that it is well glossed over, and then she will allow you the greatest liberty in words and afterwards in actions. Take care to roll your eyes tenderly when she has her breasts lowered, and speak to her of the delights of platonic love and the commerce of souls, whilst employing the most unplatonic and least ideal pantomime possible! She is very sensual and very susceptible; kiss her as much as you please; but in the most intimate of relations do not forget to call her Madam at least three times in every sentence; she quarreled with me because of my familiarity, though I was her lover. Well, a woman is not honorable for nothing."

"I have not a great inclination, after what you have told me, to chance the adventure. A prudish Messaline! the combination is novel and monstrous."

"Old as the world, my dear fellow! Instances are to be found every day, and nothing is more common. You are wrong not to attach yourself to her. Her great attraction is that with her one always appears to be committing a mortal sin, and the tiniest kiss appears quite damnable; while with others it hardly seems like a venial offense, and often even none at all. That is the reason I retained her longer than any other mistress. I should still have her, if she had not left of her own accord; she is the only woman who has forestalled me, and I have a certain respect for her on that account. She possesses certain of the most delicate refinements of pleasure, and the great art of appearing to allow the favors she grants so freely to be wrested from her, and this gives to each one the charm of a rape. You will find in society ten of her lovers who will swear to you that she is the most virtuous creature in the world. She is precisely the opposite. To dissect this virtue upon a pillow is a curious study. As you are forewarned you run no risk, and you will not be foolish enough to become really enamored of her."

"How old is this adorable person?" I asked C., for it was impossible to determine her age even after a most careful scrutiny.

"Ah! that is a mystery. I, who pride myself on being able to tell a woman's age almost to a minute, have never been able to discover hers. Approximately, I should think she is between twenty-eight and thirty-six. I have seen her dressed and undressed, and I have learned nothing; my experience is quite at fault; she seems most like eighteen, but that cannot be her age. She has the body of a virgin with the soul of a courtesan, and to become so thoroughly corrupt requires time or genius; it needs a heart of bronze in a breast of steel; she has neither the one nor the other. For that reason I think she is thirty-six, but, after all, I am quite in the dark."

"Has she no intimate friend who could enlighten you?"

"No, she appeared here two years ago. She came from the provinces or abroad, I don't know which, and that is an admirable position for a woman who knows how to profit by it. With a face like hers she can give herself any age she pleases, and only date from the day she came here."

He pointed out several others who, according to him, would favorably receive any request it might please me to address to them, and would treat me with quite exceptional philanthropy. But the woman in red in the corner of the fireplace and the modest dove who served as her antithesis were incomparably better than all the others, and if they had not all the qualities I demanded, they had some of them at least in appearance.

I talked all the evening to them, especially the latter, and I took care to cast my ideas in a most respectful mold; although she hardly looked at me, I thought I sometimes saw her eyes glisten beneath the curtain of her brows, and a slight rosy tint appear beneath her skin at some rather pronounced gallantries, well veiled though they were, upon which I ventured. Her replies generally were serious and guarded, but still keen and full of point, and provided food for thought rather than actual expressions. Her talk was interspersed with reticences, half-words, and indirect allusions, of which each syllable had its intention, each silence its meaning; nothing in the world could be more diplomatic or charming. Yet, however great the momentary pleasure of such a conversation, I could not endure it long. It was necessary to be continually on the watch and on guard, whereas in a conversation, familiarity and confidence are the qualities I prefer. We talked of music, then the conversation naturally drifted to the opera, and afterwards to women and love, the easiest subject of all in which to pass from generality to specialty. I would not have believed myself capable of such a display of pathos and nonsense. It was the evening of my life, when I assumed my most virtuous air, while all the time my mind was filled with the most opposite intentions. My expression of face would have lulled the suspicions of a mother most solicitous of her daughter's honor, and any husband would have intrusted his wife to my care. I thought it was more difficult than that to be a hypocrite and to say things one did not mean. But it must be easy enough, or very much according to my inclination, or else I should not have been so successful at my first attempt.

As for the lady, she entered into many details which, in spite of her candid manner, proved her extensive experience; it is not possible to give any idea of the subtlety of her distinctions. From her way of speaking, too, it was impossible to believe that she had even the shadow of a body, there being something of the immaterial, vaporous, and ideal about her; and if C. had not warned me of her behavior, I should most certainly have despaired of the success of my attentions and held myself pitifully aloof. How, too, can one, after a woman has talked in the most unconcerned fashion possible for two hours about love existing only on privation and sacrifice, and other beautiful things of this nature, decently hope to persuade her one day to take pity on oneself.

Briefly we were great friends when we parted, congratulating each other, as we did so, on the purity and loftiness of our sentiments.

My conversation with the other lady, as you may imagine, was of quite a different character. We laughed as often as we spoke. We made fun of all the women present, in a very clever fashion; when I say we made fun of all the women, I mean that she did so, for a man never ridicules a woman. I listened and applauded, for hers was the most curious gallery of caricatures I have ever seen. In spite of their exaggeration, the truth underlying her pictures was apparent. C. was quite right; this woman's mission was to disenchant poets. She had about her an atmosphere of prose in which a poetic idea could not live. She was charming and sparklingly clever, and yet, at her side, ignoble and vulgar thoughts were the only ones which came into one's head; as I talked to her, I felt a number of incongruous and at the time impracticable desires enter my mind. I felt a longing for wine with which to become intoxicated, I wished to drop down on one knee and kiss her throat, to raise the hem of her dress to see if her garter was above or below the knee, to sing a vulgar song at the top of my voice, to smoke a pipe or break the windows. All the animal part, the brute, rose to the surface in me; I would most willingly have spat upon Homer's *Iliad*, and I would have knelt down before a ham. I now understand perfectly the allegory of the companions of Ulysses who were turned into swine by Circe. Circe was probably lively, like the little woman in red.

I am ashamed to confess that I experienced a great delight in feeling myself overwhelmed by brutishness. I offered no opposition, but aided with all my strength, so natural is corruption to man, and so much mud is there in the clay from which he is molded.

But I had a slight fear of this gangrene which was gaining possession of me, and I wished to leave the corruptress; but I seemed to be chained to my seat.

In the end I tore myself away from her, and it being very late, I returned home in great perplexity, very disturbed in my mind, and hardly knowing what to do. I hesitated between prudery and gallantry. I found pleasure in the one and piquancy in the other; and after a long and profound examination of conscience, I realized not that I loved them both, but that I liked them, one as much as the other.

From all appearances, old friend, I shall make love to one of these women, perhaps both, and yet that will only half satisfy me; it is not because they are not pretty, but at the sight of them nothing cried out in me, palpitated, or said, "These are the women." I did not recognize them. Still, I don't think I shall meet any one better on the score of breeding and beauty, so I will follow C.'s advice, and one or the other shall be my mistress; but in the depths of my heart a secret voice reproaches me with being false to my love, and halting like this at the first smile of a woman I do not love, instead of tirelessly searching through the world, in cloisters and in slums, in palaces and in taverns, for the woman who was made for me, whom God destined for me, whether she be princess or servant, nun or courtesan.

Then I told myself that I was full of fancies, and after all, what did it matter whether it was one woman or another, that the earth would still pursue its path and the seasons succeed one another. But it was in vain that I reasoned like that, for I was neither easier in my mind nor more resolute.

That is perhaps the result of my living very much by myself, for the tiniest details in such a monotonous life as mine assume great importance. I listen too much to myself living and thinking. I hear the throbbing of my arteries, the pulsations of my heart. I disentangle my most elusive ideas from the vapor in which they float and I give them a body. If I acted more I should not see all these little things, and I should not have the time to examine my own soul under the microscope, as I do all day. The sound of action would dissipate the host of idle thoughts which flutter through my head and stupefy me with the buzzing of their wings. Instead of pursuing phantoms I should struggle with realities; I should ask women for what they could give, pleasure, and I should not try to embrace some fantastic ideal adorned with shadowy perfections. This fierce tension of the eye of my soul towards an invisible object falsifies my sight. I am deprived of the ability to see what exists through looking at what does not, and my eye, so piercing where the ideal is concerned, is quite short-sighted when confronted with the real; thus I have known women whom all the world called delightful, yet I did not think them so. I have greatly admired pictures which were considered by most people bad, and strange and unintelligible verses have given me more pleasure than the finest efforts. I should not be surprised, after addressing so many sighs to the moon, gazing so long at the stars, composing so many sentimental elegies and apostrophes, if I were to fall in love with an ignoble courtesan or an old and ugly woman; it would be a fitting conclusion. Or perhaps, being unable to find anything in the world worthy of my love, I shall end by adoring myself. To protect myself from so great a misfortune I gaze into all the mirrors and streams I see. Really, through my reveries and aberrations, I have an enormous fear of falling into the monstrous and unnatural. That is serious and must be carefully avoided. Good-bye, old friend. I am going to see the lady in red, so that I may avoid my usual contemplation. I do not think spiritualism will occupy much of our time, although she is a very "spiritual" creature. I am carefully putting on one side my ideal, so as not to contrast her with it. I wish to quietly enjoy the beauty and merits she has. It is a wise resolution, but I do not know whether I shall keep to it. Once more, good-bye.

Chapter III

ROSETTE

I am the lover of the lady in red; it is almost a state, an obligation, and if gives a stability to the world. I have no longer the appearance of a schoolboy seeking an adventure among the grandmothers, and not daring to recite a madrigal to a woman unless she be a hundred. I can see since my installation that I am esteemed a great deal more highly, that all the women speak to me in a jealously coquettish fashion and make great advances to me. The men, on the other hand, put more coldness into the few words we exchange, and there is something hostile and constrained in their manner. They feel that they already have in me a dangerous rival, and one who may become even more so. I recall how severely they criticized my attire and the way I arrange my hair, but all the ladies look upon me as a model of good taste and appreciate the compliment I pay them by the elegance of my attire.

The lady of the house at first seemed a little piqued at my choice, which she considered ought to have fallen upon herself, and for a few days she maintained some amount of asperity to her rival, though to myself she has always been the same. She, however, confined herself to the thousand and one little unfriendly observations which women make to one another when the opportunity presents itself, consisting generally of a criticism of their dress, their coiffure or their appearance. But soon another object attracted the attention of the slighted woman, the little war of words ceased, and everything pursued its normal course.

Though I have told you that I am the lover of the lady in red, I suppose that will not satisfy you; you will want to know her name. I shall not, however, tell you her real name, but will call her Rosette, which is a pretty enough name.

Your love of precision in affairs of the sort will lead you to desire to know the story of my love affair with this lady step by step, and the way in which I passed from the general to the particular, and from the rôle of spectator to that of actor. I will satisfy your wishes with the greatest of pleasure. There is nothing sinister in our romance, everything is *couleur de rose*, and the only tears shed are those of pleasure; there are no delays or rebuffs, and everything progresses with the haste and rapidity so commended by Horace —just like a French novel. Still, do not think I carried the citadel at the first assault. The princess, though very human to her subjects, is not as prodigal of her favors as at first seemed probable; she knows too well their value not to exact their full value; she also knows the advantages of a proper delay and a partial resistance, so she will not surrender herself to a man at first, however strong a liking she may have for him.

But to tell the story from the time of our first meeting. I met her once, twice, or even three times at the same place, then she asked me to call upon her; I did not wait to be entreated, you may imagine; I went discreetly at first, then a little more often, then oftener still, and then every time I felt so disposed, which, I must admit, was often three or four times a day. The lady, after I had been absent a few hours, received me as if I had just returned from the East Indies: I was not insensible to this, and felt obliged to show my gratitude in a manner marked by the utmost gallantry, and she responded to the best of her ability.

Rosette, as we have agreed to call her, is a very clever woman, understanding the male sex in the most admirable fashion; although she delayed for some time the end of the chapter, I never once became angry with her—really a very wonderful thing, for you know how angry I become when my desires are thwarted, and when a woman exceeds the time I have allotted her in my mind. I do not know how she did it; but from our first meeting she made me understand that she would be mine, and I was more certain of her than if I held her promise signed and sealed in my hand. It might, perhaps, be urged that the familiarity of her manners left a free field for the temerity of hope. I do not think that was the real reason. I have seen some women whose extraordinary freedom, though it excluded every shadow of a doubt, did not produce this effect upon me, and I have been nervous and anxious in their presence.

Generally, I am less amiable to women I like than to those who are indifferent to me, and the cause of it is my passionate watchfulness and my uncertainty as to success; these things make me gloomy, and cast me into a reverie which deprives me of my abilities and presence of mind. When I see the hours I had destined for another occupation pass one by one, anger overcomes me in spite of myself, and I cannot help making biting and satirical remarks, which sometimes are quite brutal, and hinder terribly my project. With Rosette I never had that feeling; even when she resisted the most strongly, I never gained the impression she desired to escape my love. I allowed her to quietly display her coquetries, I accepted patiently the delays it pleased her to impose upon my passion. There was something smiling in her firmness which consoled me as far as possible, and in her cruelty there was visible a human undercurrent which removed all cause for serious alarm. Honorable women, even when they are so to the least possible extent, have a reluctant and disdainful manner which is quite unbearable to me. They seem to be always on the point of ringing and having one turned out by their servants; and it seems to me that a man who takes the trouble to make love to a woman (and that is not so agreeable as people would have you believe) does not deserve to be looked at in that way.

Dear Rosette has no glances of that sort; I can assure you she profits by the fact. I have made the best of my cleverness, and by the fire and smartness of her answers she has caused me to excel myself. It is true that I have not been poetic, but that is hardly possible with her. Still she has her poetic side, in spite of all that C. has told me; but she is so full of life, force, and movement, she has the appearance of being so happy in her surroundings, that one has no wish to see her leave them to ascend into the clouds. She occupies real life so agreeably, and makes it so amusing for herself and for others, that reverie has nothing better to offer.

Rosette has the best disposition in the world, as far as men are concerned be it understood, for with women she is an incarnation of evil; she is gay, lively, alert, ready for anything, quite original in her way of speaking, and she always has some charming and unexpected witticism to tell. She is a delightful companion rather than mistress; and if I were a few years older, and had a few less romantic ideas, that would be quite sufficient for me, and I should consider myself the most fortunate individual in the world. But—oh, that word of ill omen!—I am an imbecile, idiot, a real goose; never satisfied, always looking for midday at two o'clock; and instead of being perfectly happy I am only half. Of course, that is a great deal for this world, but still I find it not enough.

In the eyes of the world I have a mistress whom several desire and envy me, and whom no one would disdain. In appearance, then, my object is fulfilled, and I have no longer any right to quarrel with fate. Yet I do not seem to have a mistress, and if any one were to unexpectedly ask me if I had one, I believe I should say "no." The possession, however, of a woman who has beauty, youth, and intelligence constitutes what in every country and age is called a mistress, and I do not think there is any other way. That does not prevent me from having the strangest doubts on this score, and they go so far that, if several persons agreed to maintain that I am not Rosette's favored lover, in spite of the palpable evidence to the contrary, in the end I should believe them.

Do not think, after what I have told you, that I do not love her, or that she displeases me in any way. On the contrary, I love her very dearly, and find her, like everybody else, a pretty, piquant creature. I simply do not feel that she belongs to me, that is all. One of her kisses, the most chaste of her caresses, makes me quiver to the soles of my feet, and makes my blood rush to my heart. Although I admit that, the fact still stands as I have told you. But man's heart is full of such absurdities; and if it were necessary to reconcile all the contradiction it contains, that would be a heavy task. What is their origin? Truly I do not know.

I see her all day, and at all times if I wish. Her complaisance is inexhaustible; she enters perfectly into all my caprices, however strange they may be.

I am very unfortunate not to be able to acquire the moral certainty of a thing of which I have the physical proof. The opposite is usually the case, and it is the fact which proves the idea; I should like to prove the fact by the idea. I cannot do so; strange though it seems, it is nevertheless true. Up to a certain point the possession of a mistress depends upon myself; but I cannot make myself believe that I have one in her. If I have not the necessary faith for so obvious a thing, it is as impossible for me to believe in a simple fact as it is for others to believe in the Trinity. Faith is not acquired, it is a pure gift, a special grace from Heaven.

Never has any one desired as much as I have to live some one else's life and to assimilate another nature; no one has ever succeeded so badly. Whatever I do, other men are to me but phantoms, and I do not realize their existence; it is not, however, the desire to find out their life and participate in it that I lack. It is the power of real sympathy. The existence or non-existence of a thing or person does not sufficiently interest me to affect me in a sensible and convincing manner. The sight of a woman or a man appearing to me in real life does not leave upon my mind stronger traces than a dream's fantastic vision; around me moves a pale world of shadows, of false or true apparitions, flitting hither and thither, in the midst of which I find myself as perfectly alone as possible, for they have no influence upon me for good or evil, and they seem of quite a different nature to myself. If I speak to them, and they give an almost common-sense reply, I am as surprised as if my dog or cat suddenly found its tongue and joined in the conversation; the sound of their voices always astonishes me, and I would gladly believe that they are only fugitive appearances, of which I am the object mirror. Whether inferior or superior, I am most certainly not of their species. There are times when I only recognize God above me, and others when I consider myself hardly the equal of the wood-louse or the mollusc upon its sand-bank; but in whatever state of mind I am, high or low, I have never been able to persuade myself that men are really like myself. When I am called "sir," or spoken of as "this gentleman," I think it very strange. Even my name seems an imaginary title, and not my real name; but however low it is spoken, in the midst of the loudest uproar, I turn quickly, with a convulsive and febrile rapidity for which I have never been able to account. Is it the fear of finding an antagonist or enemy in the man who knows my name, and to whom I am no longer one of the crowd?

In particular, when I have lived with a woman, I have most clearly realized what an invincible repulsion my nature has to any alliance of mixture. I am like a drop of oil in a glass of water. However much you shake the glass, the oil will never mix with the water; but the former will split up into a hundred thousand little globules, which will rejoin and rise to the surface as soon as the shaking ceases; the drop of oil and the glass of water sum up my history. Even pleasure, the diamond chain which unites all beings, the devouring fire which melts the rocks and metals of the soul, and makes them dissolve into tears, just as real fire in its omnipotence dissolves iron and granite, has never been able to subdue or soften me. Yet I have the keenest of sensibilities; but my soul is at enmity with my body, and the unhappy couple, like any possible pair, legal or illegal, live in a state of perpetual warfare. The arms of a woman, which, it is said, bind all that is best on earth, are to me the weakest of bonds, and I was never further from my mistress than when she pressed me to her heart. I was stifled, that was all. How many times have I been enraged with myself! How many efforts have I made to be different! How have I exhorted myself to be tender, amorous, passionate, without success! How often have I tried to involve my soul in my love affairs! But what a punishment it must be for my poor soul to assist at the debauchery of my body, and to perpetually sit down at feasts where it has nothing to eat!

With Rosette, I have made up my mind once for all to determine whether I am not decidedly unsociable, and prove whether I can take sufficient interest in another's existence to believe in it. I have exhausted myself with my tests, without setting my doubts at rest. With her my pleasure is so keen that the soul is, often enough, if not touched at least distracted, and that deprives observations of a great deal of their exactness. After all I recognized that it was only skin deep, and that I only had surface enjoyment in which out of curiosity alone did the soul participate. I enjoyed a certain amount of pleasure because I am young and passionate; but the pleasure came from myself, and not from another. Its cause is in myself rather than in Rosette.

I have tried in vain, for I have not succeeded in emerging from myself for a moment.

I am the same as before, a very bored and wearisome person, who displeases me very much. I have not succeeded in introducing into my brain some other person's ideas, into my soul another person's sentiments, or into my body the sorrow or enjoyment of another. I am a prisoner in myself, and invasion is quite impossible. The prisoner desires to escape, the walls ask nothing better than to crumble, the gates to open to let him go; I know not what fatality retains every stone in its place and every bolt in its socket; it is quite as impossible to admit some one else into myself as to transfer myself to another; I know not how to pay or receive visits, and I live in the most melancholy isolation in the midst of the crowd. My bed cannot belong to a widower, but my heart does always.

Ah! to be unable to increase myself by a single particle, by a single atom; to be unable to make the blood of another flow in my veins; to see always with my own eyes, neither more clearly nor more distantly than before; to listen to sounds with the same ears and emotion; to touch with the same fingers, to be condemned to the same tones of the voice, the same phrases and words, and to be unable to flee from myself and take refuge in some unapproachable corner; to be forced to remain with myself forever, to dine and sleep, to be the same man for twenty different women; to drag into the strangest situations of the drama of life a person whose part you know by heart; to think the same things, to have the same dreams: what punishment, what boredom it all is.

I have desired the heart of the brothers Tangut, the hat of Fortunatus, the wand of Abaris, the ring of Gyges. I would have sold my soul to snatch the magic ring from some fairy's hand; but I have never desired anything so much as, like Tiresis the soothsayer, to meet in the mountains those serpents which bring about the change of sex, and the attributes I envy most in the monstrous and curious gods of India are their countless transformations.

I began by desiring to be another man; then reflecting that I could, by analogy, almost foresee what I should feel, and so not experience the surprise and expected change, I should have preferred to be a woman. That idea has always come to me when I had a mistress who was not ugly; for an ugly woman is a man to me, and in moments of pleasure I would willingly exchange my part, for it is very annoying not to have a consciousness of the effect one produces, and only be able to judge of the enjoyment of others by one's own. These thoughts and many others have often given me, at times when it was very much out of place, a dreamy and meditative air which has caused me, quite wrongly, to be accused of coolness and infidelity.

Rosette, who does not know all this, fortunately considers me the most amorous man on earth; she takes my impotent fury for passion, and lends herself to all the experimental caprices which come into my head.

I have done everything possible to convince myself of her reality. I have tried to descend into her heart, but I have always halted at the first step, at her skin or her mouth. In spite of our relations, I know very well there is nothing common to both of us. Never has an idea similar to mine unfurled its wings in her pretty, good-tempered head; never has her heart, full of life and fire, the motive power of a breast so pure and firm, beaten in unison with my own. My soul has never united with her soul. Cupid, the god with wings, did not kiss Psyche upon her beautiful ivory brow. No! this woman is not my mistress.

If you only knew all I have done to force my soul to share my body's love! With what fury have I fastened my mouth to her mouth, buried my arms in her hair, and clasped her round and supple waist. I have drunk her breath and the warm tears trickling from the overflowing of her eyes. The more we embraced the less I loved her. My soul sadly looked on at this deplorable hymen to which it was not invited with an air of pity, or else retired in disgust to weep silently apart. It seems that I really do not love Rosette, worthy though she be of my affection, and great though my desire to bestow it.

To rid myself of the idea that I am myself, I have conjured up strange surroundings in which it was quite improbable I should recognize myself, and I have tried, being unable to cast aside my individuality, to make it quite unrecognizable. I have met with very little success in this, and the devil of myself obstinately pursues me; there is no way of defeating him; I am not in a position to make the excuse as to other unwelcome visitors—that I am not at home, or have gone into the country.

I have taken my mistress to bathe, and I have played the part of Triton to the best of my ability, the sea being a large marble basin, where the water, transparent though it was, seemed to conceal a part of the Nereid's exquisite beauty. At night, by moonlight we have sailed together in a gondola to the accompaniment of music; common though this is in Venice, it is a novelty here.

We have galloped through the darkness together in her carriage. I have climbed through her window, though I have had the key of the door in my pocket. I have made her call upon me in broad daylight, and compromised her so thoroughly that no one now, with the exception of myself, doubts that she is my mistress.

In spite of all these extravagances, which, were I not so young, would seem like the resources of a worn-out libertine, Rosette adores me more than any one. She sees in them the ardor of a petulant and uncontrollable love, which is always the same in spite of a difference of time and place. She sees in them the never-ceasing effect of her charm and the triumph of her beauty, and really I would she were right, for in all justice it is neither her fault nor mine that she is not.

The only thing I have against her is that I am myself. If I were to tell her so, she would quickly answer that in her eyes this was my greatest merit, a reply which would be more polite than sensible.

Once, at the commencement of our liaison, I thought I had attained my object, for a moment I believed that I loved her. Old friend, that moment was the only one I have lived, and if that minute had been an hour, I should have become a god. We were riding together, I upon Ferragus, she upon a snow-white mare that looked like a unicorn, so slender were her legs and slim her neck. We were traversing a great avenue of elms of tremendous height; the sun descended upon us warm and bright, though tempered by the foliage; in a mackerel sky long lines of pale blue stretched across the edges of the horizon, and changed into an extremely soft apple-green when they met the orange tints of the sunset. The appearance of the sky was charming and singular; the breeze bore a most delightful odor of wild flowers. From time to time a bird rose in front of us and burst into song as it crossed the avenue. The bell of a village we could not see softly rang out the Angelus, and its silver tones, softened by distance, was infinitely sweet. Our mounts walked side by side at exactly the same pace. My heart dilated and my soul overflowed into my body. I had never been so happy. Neither I nor Rosette spoke, and yet never before had we so well understood one another. We were so close together that my leg touched Rosette's mare. I leaned towards her and put my arm around her waist; she made a similar movement and leaned her head upon my shoulder. Our mouths joined in a chaste and most delightful kiss! Our horses walked on with their bridles on their necks. I felt Rosette's arm relax, and her body bend more and more. I myself became weak and was ready to faint. I can assure you, at that moment I hardly considered whether I was myself or some one else. We had reached the end of the avenue like this, when the sound of footsteps made us quickly resume our proper positions; it was a mounted patrol who saluted us. If I had been provided with pistols I believe I should have fired.

I assumed a furious and threatening air which must have seemed very strange. After all, I was wrong to become so angry, for I had been rendered a great service by the unwitting interruption of my pleasure at a point when by its own intensity it was becoming painful and would collapse under its own violence. To stop in time is a science which is not always regarded with all the respect it deserves. Sometimes when you put your arm around a woman's waist, at first you experience a great pleasure at the touch of her warm flesh. If the beauty goes to sleep in this amorous and charming position her muscles relax, and then your arm is more heavily weighted; you begin to realize that she is a woman, not a sylph. You would not remove your arm for anything on earth for many reasons, one of them being that it is dangerous to wake a woman from her sleep; another that by asking her to raise herself so that you may withdraw your arm you tell her in an indirect fashion that she is heavy and tires you, or else you make her think you are weak or weary, and that has a most humiliating and harmful effect in her mind as far as you are concerned. The third reason is that once having had pleasure in that position, there is a mistaken idea that in retaining the position the pleasure will recur. The poor arm is helpless under the weight which weighs it down, the blood stops flowing, the nerves are disturbed, and the numbing gives you the feeling of being pricked with thousands of needles. Day comes at last and delivers you from your martyrdom, and you leap from the rack with more haste than ever husband made in descending from the nuptial scaffold.

This is the history of many passions and all pleasures. In spite of the interruption, or on its account, I never before experienced such pleasure. I felt that I was really another person. Rosette's soul had entirely entered into my body. My soul had left me and had occupied her heart as her soul had done mine. Without a doubt they met on the way in the long kiss we exchanged (our "equestrian" kiss, as Rosette has since dubbed it), and had been interchanged and intermingled as closely as the souls of two mortal creatures could upon a grain of perishable clay.

Assuredly angels must embrace like that, and true paradise is not in heaven, but upon the mouth of the beloved.

I have waited in vain for a similar moment, and I have unsuccessfully tried to provoke its return. We have often ridden through the avenues of the forest at sunset; the trees had the same verdure, the birds sang similar songs, but we found the sun dimmed and the foliage dull, while the notes of the birds seemed harsh and discordant, for harmony was no longer in us. We slackened our horses to a walk and attempted a similar kiss. Alas! our lips alone joined, and it was but the specter of the former kiss. The beautiful, sublime, divine kiss, the only real kiss I have given and received in my life, had departed for ever. From that day I have always returned from the wood with a fund of inexpressible sadness. Rosette, gay and frolicsome though she usually is, cannot escape from this impression, and her reverie is betrayed by a little, delicately puckered pout, which is at least as charming as her smile.

Only the fumes of wine and brilliant lights can rid me of these melancholy thoughts. We drink like people condemned to death, in silence, glass for glass, till we have imbibed the requisite quantity; then we begin to laugh and jest with the utmost heartiness at what we describe as our sentimentality.

We laugh because we cannot weep. Ah! what could draw a tear from my exhausted eyes?

Why had I so much pleasure that evening? It would be difficult for me to say. Yet I was the same man and Rosette the same woman. It was not the first occasion we had ridden together. We had previously seen the sun set, and the spectacle had no more touched us than the sight of an admirable picture with its brilliant colors. There is more than one avenue of elms and chestnut trees in the world and that was not the first occasion we had traversed it; what then caused us to discover such a sovereign charm, which transformed dead leaves into topaz and green foliage into emerald, which gilded all these fluttering fragments, and changed into pearl all the drops of water scattered over the green-sward, which gave such sweet harmony to the sounds of a usually discordant bell and to the chirps of all kinds of little birds? There must have been most penetrating poetry in the air, since even our steeds seemed to feel its effects.

Nothing in the world, however, could have been simpler and more pastoral: a few trees, clouds, five or six branches of foliage, a woman, and a ray of sunshine falling upon a scene like a golden chevron upon a coat of arms. Nor did I have any feeling of surprise or astonishment. I well remember it all. I never afterwards visited that spot without perfectly recollecting the shape of the foliage, the position of the clouds, the white pigeon which crossed the sky flying in the same direction; the little silvery bell I then heard for the first time had often tinkled in my ear, and its voice seemed to me like that of a friend; I had, without ever going there, traversed that avenue many times with princesses mounted upon unicorns; the most voluptuous of my dreams had been located there every evening, and my desires had there exchanged kisses just like the one I exchanged with Rosette. That kiss had nothing new to me in it, for it was just as I thought it would be. It was perhaps the only time in my life that I was not disappointed, when the reality appeared to me as beautiful as the ideal. If I could find a woman, a landscape, a building, something answering to my inmost desires as perfectly as that moment agreed with the minute of my dreams, I should have no cause of envy against the gods, and I would most willingly give up my seat in Paradise. But, in reality, I do not think that a man of flesh and blood could resist for an hour such penetrating pleasure; two kisses like that would comprise an entire existence, and would create a complete void in soul and body. That consideration would not stop me; for being unable to prolong my life indefinitely, death is of no concern to me, and I should prefer to die of pleasure than of age or ennui.

But this woman does not exist. If she exists, I am perhaps only separated from her by a partition. I have perhaps touched her in passing, either yesterday or to-day.

How does Rosette differ from such a woman? My belief that she is the woman is all that is lacking. What fatality is it that always makes me have love affairs with women I do not love? Her neck is polished for the most beautiful necklaces, her fingers are sufficiently tapered to do honor to the richest and most beautiful rings, rubies would blush with pleasure at being allowed to gleam at the pink tip of her beautiful ear, her waist would do honor to the cestus of Venus; but it is Love alone who knows how to fasten his mother's sash.

All Rosette's merit is in herself. I have lent her nothing. I have not thrown over her beauty that veil of perfection with which love envelops the person of the beloved; the veil of Isis is transparency by the side of it. Satiety is the only thing which can lift the corner of it.

I do not love Rosette; at least, the love I have for her, if I have any, does not resemble the idea that I am made for love. After all my idea is not perhaps right. I dare decide nothing. Still, it makes me quite insensible to the charms of other women, and I have thought of no one else since I have known her. If she has cause for jealousy, it is only of phantoms, and they are unlikely to cause her much uneasiness; my imagination is her most dangerous rival, though, with all her cleverness, she will probably never perceive it.

If women knew that! How many infidelities the least flightly lover commits against his most beloved mistress! It is to be presumed that women do likewise, or even worse; but, like us, they say nothing. A mistress is like an ordinary theme, which usually disappears beneath flourish and improvisation. Often the kisses she receives are not for her; it is the idea of another woman that is kissed in her person, and she benefits more than once (if it can be called a benefit) by thoughts inspired by others. Ah! poor Rosette, how many times have you served as the incarnation for my dreams and given a reality to your rivals; of how many infidelities have you unwittingly been the accomplice! If you could have thought at the moment my arms embraced you so tightly, when my mouth was pressed against your own, that your beauty and love were of no value, that your features were a thousand miles away from my thoughts; if you had been told that those eyes, veiled with amorous languor, were cast down in order not to see you, and not to dispel the illusion that you only served to complete, and that you were only an effort of my imagination, a means of deceiving a desire impossible of realization!

O heavenly creatures, beautiful virgins, frail and diaphanous, who droop your eyes and clasp your lily hands upon the golden-framed pictures of the old German masters, you saints in stained-glass windows, you martyrs from the missals who smile so gently in the midst of scrolls of arabesques, and who emerge so blonde and fresh from the bell of flowers! O you beautiful courtesans, reclining upon beds strewn with roses, beneath large purple curtains, with your bracelets and necklaces of great pearls, your fan and your mirrors, in which the setting sun is reflected amid the shadows! dark daughters of Titian, who display your beautiful figures so voluptuously! ancient goddesses whose white phantoms hover 'neath the shades of the garden, you are all part of my seraglio; I have adored you all in turn. I have played with the dark hair of Muranese, and never before had Rosette so much difficulty in rearranging her hair. Virgin Diana, I have been your admirer more than Actæon, and I have not been changed into a stag; I it was who replaced your beautiful Endymion! How many unsuspected rivals there are, against whom no revenge is possible! But still are they not always painted or sculptured!

Women, when you see your lover become more tender than usual and clasp you in his arms with extraordinary emotion; when he raises his head to gaze upon you with humid and wandering eyes; when enjoyment only serves to increase his tenderness, and he drowns your voice beneath his kisses, as if he feared to listen to it, be sure that he is not aware of your presence; that he is keeping an appointment with a chimera which you render palpable by playing its part. Many chambermaids have profited by the love inspired by queens. Many women have profited by the love inspired by goddesses, and a commonplace reality has often served as the pedestal for the ideal idol. That is why poets usually have such commonplace love-affairs. There is the story of many great geniuses whose ignoble and obscure relations have made the world astonished.

I have only been unfaithful to Rosette after this fashion. I have only deceived her with pictures and statues, and she has contributed a half to my treachery. I have not upon my conscience the tiniest material transgression with which to reproach myself. I am, in this respect, as white as the snow upon the Jungfrau, and yet without being amorous of any one, I desire to be so. I do not look for an opportunity, nor should I be angry if it presented itself; if it came, perhaps I should not make use of it, for I have an inner conviction that it would be just the same with another; now, in this woman I have at least a pretty and witty comrade, and one most agreeably demoralized, and that consideration is not one of the least of the ties which bind me to her, for in losing the woman, I should be in despair at the loss of the friend.

Chapter IV

ARIADNE

Do you know that for five months, which seem like five eternities, I have been Madam Rosette's devoted admirer? That is very fine. I should not have believed myself so faithful, nor would she, I would wager. We are indeed a pair of turtle-doves in our affection.

It has been a five-months' *tête-à-tête* for we meet every day, and almost every evening, with the doors closed against other visitors. Ah, well, one thing I must say to the glory of the incomparable Rosette, I am not greatly bored, and this time will, no doubt, be the most agreeable of my life. I do not think it possible for any woman to occupy in a more constant and amusing fashion a man without passion, and God knows what a terrible disenchantment is that produced by an empty heart! I can give you no idea of this woman's resources. She began by taking them from her mind, and ended by doing so from her heart, for she loves me to adoration. With what art does she profit by the tiniest spark, and how she can make it flame! How skillfully she directs the tiniest movements of the soul! How she can convert languor into tender reverie! and by how many devious methods can she bring back to herself the mind which is far away! It is wonderful! I admire her as one of the greatest geniuses who has ever lived.

I have before now visited her in a very bad temper, with the object of a quarrel. I do not know how the witch has managed it, but at the end of a few minutes she has forced me to pay her compliments, although I had not the least desire to do so, to kiss her hands and laugh with all my might, although I was in a terrible rage. Can you form an idea of such tyranny?

But however clever she may be, our *tête-à-tête* cannot be prolonged much further, and during the last fortnight I have done a thing I never did before, I have picked up a book from her table and read a few lines during the gaps in the conversation. Rosette has noticed it with a feeling of terror she has been unable to conceal, and she has removed all books from her boudoir. I must admit that I regret their absence, though I cannot ask for them. The other day (a terrible symptom) some one came while we were together, and instead of flying into a rage as I used to do I felt almost glad. I was nearly amiable, and maintained the conversation which Rosette tried to make flag so that the gentleman would go, and when he had gone I even remarked that he was a clever fellow and good company. Rosette reminded me that two months before I considered him stupid and the greatest fool on earth, and to this I could make no reply, for I had indeed said so; and I was quite right, in spite of the apparent contradiction; for on the first occasion he had disturbed a charming conversation, and on the second he had come to the rescue of a worn-out and languishing (on one side, at any rate) talk, and was the means of sparing me, for that day, at any rate, my fatiguing part in a love scene.

That is the state of affairs; the position is a serious one, especially when one of the two is still in love and clinging desperately to the remnants of the other's affection. I am in a position of great perplexity. Although I am not in love with Rosette, I have a great affection for her, and would not like to do anything to cause her pain. I want her to believe as long as possible that I love her.

Out of gratitude for all those hours she has made pass so quickly, out of gratitude for the love she has given me, in return for pleasure, I desire it. I will deceive her; for is not an agreeable deception better than a painful truth—and I shall never have the heart to tell her I do not love her. The vain shadow of love on which she feasts appears so adorable and dear to her, she embraces the pale specter with so much intoxication and effusion, that I dare not make it vanish; yet I am afraid in the end she will perceive that it is only a phantom. This morning we had a talk, which I will report in dramatic form for greater fidelity, and which makes me fear that I shall not be able to prolong our liaison much further.

"Do not yawn like that"—Rosette is addressing me—"or I will not kiss you for a week."

"Well!"

"You don't seem sir, to place much value upon my kisses."

"On the contrary."

"You say that in a very unconcerned fashion. Very well, sir, you can be sure that for a week I will not touch you with my lips. Today is Tuesday, so not till next Tuesday."

"Bah!"

"Why bah?"

"Yes, bah! You will kiss me before this evening or I shall die."

"You will die. What a coxcomb you are! I have spoiled you, sir."

"I shall live. I am not a coxcomb, and you have not spoiled me; quite the reverse. First of all, I demand the suppression of the 'sir'; I have known you long enough for you to call me by name."

"I have spoiled you, Albert."

"Good. Now bring your mouth nearer."

"No, Tuesday next."

"Come! do we now embrace calender in hand? We are both of us a little too young for that. Your mouth, my child, or I shall get a stiff neck."

"No."

"Ah! you want me to steal my kiss, little one; it shall be done. The thing is feasible, though perhaps it has not yet been done."

"Saucy fellow!"

"Notice, my beautiful one, that I was gallant enough to put in a 'perhaps'; that is very honorable on my part. But we are wandering from our subject. Lean your head. Come. What is the matter, my favorite sultana? How cross you look! I want to kiss a smile, not a pout."

"How can you expect me to laugh?" Rosette replies as she leans forward to be kissed. "You speak so unkindly to me!"

"My intention is to utter the most loving words. Why do you think I am unkind to you?"

"I do not know; but you are."

"You mistake for unkindness meaningless jokes."

"Do you call that meaningless? Trifles mean so much in love. I would rather you beat me than laugh as you are doing."

"Do you want to see me weep?"

"You always go from one extreme to the other. You are not asked to weep, but to talk reasonably, and to drop that quizzing tone which suits you so badly."

"It is impossible for me to talk reasonably and not to quiz; so I will beat you, as you prefer it."

"Go on."

"I would rather," I say, as I give her a few taps on the shoulders, "cut off my own head than spoil your lovely little body and mar the whiteness of your charming back. My goddess, whatever pleasure there may be in your being beaten, it shall not fall to your lot."

"You don't love me any longer."

"That does not follow at all directly from what has preceded it; that is almost as logical as saying, 'It rains, so don't give me my umbrella,' or 'It is cold, open the window.'"

"You do not love me, you have never loved me."

"Ah! things are becoming more complicated: 'You do not love me, you have never loved me.' That is passably contradictory. How can I cease to do a thing I have never done? You see, my little queen, you do not know what you are talking about, and all you say is perfectly absurd."

"I have such a desire to be loved by you that I have helped to delude myself. It is easy to believe what one desires to believe; but now I can clearly see I am mistaken. You have deceived yourself; you have acquired a taste for love, and a desire for passion. The same thing happens every day. I will not have it: it is not your fault you have not loved me; it is due to the poorness of my charms. I ought to be more beautiful, more sprightly, more coquettish; I ought to try and ascend to your level, my poet, instead of desiring to make you descend to mine. I have feared to lose you in the clouds, and

I am afraid that your head has stolen away your heart from me. I have imprisoned you in my love, and I believed, in surrendering myself to you, that you would retain something."

"Rosette, move a little further away from me; your flesh burns me, you are like a hot coal."

"If I bore you, I will go away. Ah! heart of rock, drops of water penetrate stone, but my tears cannot penetrate you." (She weeps.)

"If you weep like that, you will change the place into a bathroom, or rather, the ocean. Can you swim, Rosette?"

"Wretch!"

"Come, why am I a wretch? You flatter me, Rosette; I have not that honor. I am a careless citizen, alas! I have not committed the smallest of crimes; I have perhaps done a foolish thing in loving you to distraction, that is all. Do you desire with all your strength to make me repent of my love? I have loved you, and I love you to the utmost extent of my power. Since I have been your lover I have always walked in your shadow. I have consecrated all my time to you, my days and my evenings. I have not used long phrases to you, because I only like them when they are written; but I have given you a thousand proofs of my affection. I will not mention my scrupulous fidelity, that is understood; what more would you have of me? I am with you today, as I was yesterday, and shall be tomorrow. Is this the way a man behaves to a woman he does not love? I do all you wish me to do. You say, 'Let us go,' I go; 'let us stay,' and I remain; it seems to me that I am the most admirable lover in the world."

"That is precisely my complaint; in truth, you are the most perfect lover in the world."

"With what have you to reproach me?"

"Nothing, and I should prefer to have to complain of you."

"This is a strange quarrel."

"It is much worse. You do not love me. I can do nothing; nor can you. What would you do under these circumstances? Most certainly I should prefer to have some fault to pardon. I should scold you; you would do your best to excuse yourself, and we should make it up."

"That would be to your advantage. For the greater the crime, the greater would the reparation be."

"You know very well, sir, that I am not yet reduced to that extreme, and that if I wished now, although you do not love me, and we were to quarrel . . ."

"Yes, I admit it is the result of pure clemency on your part. Then spare me a little; that would be better than arguing in the way we are doing."

"You wish to cut short a conversation which embarrasses you; but, if you please, my fine friend, we will be content with talking."

"That is not a very extravagant luxury. I assure you that you are wrong; you are ravishingly pretty, and I have a great affection for you."

"Which you shall express to me on a future occasion."

"Well, my love, are you really a little Hyrcanian tigress? Your cruelty is unparalleled! Has a longing to make yourself a vestal taken possession of you? The caprice would be quite original."

"Why not? Stranger things have happened; but most certainly I shall be as far as you are concerned. Learn, sir, that I only love those who love me, or whom I believe do so. You are in neither class. Allow me to leave you."

"Let me go!"

"No, I will not."

"Madam, I assure you, I will not."

"Ah, well! I will remain." Rosette has not realized that she is the weaker of the two. "You are hurting my arm."

"I think you know quite well without me telling you; besides, it is a little late to capitulate when the enemy has already captured the citadel."

Here, old friend, I think it will not be out of place to conclude the dialogue, for the remainder of it can hardly be reported.

After lunching together, as it was a bright, sunny day, we went for a long country ramble. The clearness of the air, the splendor of the countryside, and the aspect of joyful nature introduced into the soul enough sentimentality and tenderness to make Rosette admit that my heart was the same as another person's.

Have you ever noticed how the shade of the woods, the murmur of the waterfalls, the song of the birds, and the odor of the foliage and flowers exercise over us, however depraved we may be, an occult power which it is impossible to resist? I will confide in you, under a vow of the greatest secrecy, that I quite recently surprised myself by displaying the most provincial emotion at the song of the nightingale. It was in a garden; the sky, though it was night, had a clearness almost equal to that of the brightest day; it was so profound and transparent that one's gaze penetrated almost to God. One could seem to see fluttering the folds of angels' robes upon the white curves of the way of Saint Jacques. The moon was up, but entirely hidden by a tree; it riddled the black foliage with thousands of little luminous holes, giving it more sparkles than ever had any Marquise's fan. Although I could see only the bluey light of the moon, I seemed to be surrounded by a population of unknown but beloved phantoms, and I did not feel alone, though I was the only person upon the terrace. I did not think, I did not dream, I was bewildered by the nature surrounding me, I felt myself rustle with the foliage, shimmer with the water, and blossom with the flowers; I was nothing more than the trees, the water, and the beauty of the night. I was all that, and I do not think it possible to be further from myself than I was at that moment. Suddenly, as if something extraordinary were about to happen, the leaves were still upon the branches, the drops of water from the fountain remained suspended in the air and did not complete their fall. The silver rays of the moon still fell upon the earth; my heart also beat so loudly that it seemed to fill the gardens with sound. Then my heart ceased to throb, and there was a great silence amid which I could hear the grass grow and a whisper two hundred leagues away. Instantly the nightingale, probably awaiting such a moment to commence his song, hurled forth from his little throat a note so shrill and clear that I heard it in my breast as much as through my ears. The music suddenly filled the crystal sky void of sound, and made a harmonious atmosphere, in which the other notes as they followed hovered as if upon wings. I understood as perfectly what the songster was saying as if I had mastered the secret of the birds' language. It was the story of loves I have missed the nightingale was telling. Never was a story more exact or truthful. He did not omit the tiniest detail or the smallest shade of expression. He told me what I had not been able to tell myself, he explained to me what I had not been able to understand; he gave a voice to my reverie, and gained an answer from the phantom which, up to that time, had been mute. I knew that I was loved, and this most languorous roulade told me that I should soon be happy. I seemed to see amid the trills of his song, and beneath the rain of notes, in a ray of moonlight, the white arms of my well-beloved outstretched towards me. She appeared gradually, with the perfume of the heart of a hundred-leaved rose. I will not try to describe to you her beauty. It was of the sort words refuse to depict. How can I utter the unutterable, how paint that which has neither form nor color, or how note a voice without tone or words? Never before have I had so much love in my heart; I would have clasped Nature to my breast. I pressed the void between my arms as if it were a virgin's waist; I gave kisses to the air as it passed by my lips. Ah! if Rosette had been there, how happy should I have been! But women never appear at the right time. The nightingale ceased to sing; the moon, unable longer to refrain from sleep, drew over her eyes a nightcap of clouds, and I left the garden; for the chill of the evening had begun to affect me.

My mistress and I still have agreeable moments, but they have to be brought about and prepared by some external circumstance, like the nightingale's song; and yet, in the beginning, I had no need to excite my imagination by looking at the moon and listening to the nightingale to enjoy all the pleasure possible to a person not really in love.

Rosette, who is still in love, does what she can to combat these disadvantages. Unfortunately, there are two things in the world which cannot be commanded: love and ennui. On my part I make superhuman efforts to overcome the somnolence which attacks me in spite of myself, and, like the country folk who begin to nod at ten o'clock in a fashionable drawing-room, I keep my eyes as wide open as possible and lift up my eyelids with my fingers! but it is all of no avail.

The dear child, who the other day hit upon a rural scheme, took me into the country yesterday.

It would perhaps be as well for me to give you a description of the aforesaid country, for it is pretty enough in its way; it will also brighten up a little all my metaphysics, and besides I need a background for the persons, as figures cannot stand out from a void or from that vague brown color with which painters fill up their canvas.

The approaches are very picturesque. Along a high road, bordered with trees, a spot is reached where several paths meet, and here stands a stone obelisk surmounted by a bowl of gilded copper. Five paths converge; then there is a sudden dip in the ground. The high road plunges down into a narrow valley, the bottom of which is occupied by a stream, which it crosses by means of a single-arch bridge, then ascends steeply the opposite slope, where a village is situated, the church tower of which can be seen peeping between the thatched roofs and the rounded tops of the apple trees. The horizon is not very vast, for it is bounded on two sides by the crest of the hill, but it is pleasant and restful to the eye. By the side of the bridge there is a mill, and a red sandstone building in the form of a tower; an almost continuous barking and the presence of a few hounds and several young dachshunds lying in the sun before the door would inform one that here lives the gamekeeper, if the buzzards and weasels nailed to the shutters could leave any doubt on the subject. Here an avenue of mountain ashes begins, the scarlet berries of which attract flocks of birds. As the passers-by are few there is a white track in the middle of the road; all the rest is covered with a short, fine moss, and in the double cart-track little frogs as green as lizards croak and jump. After a considerable walk we come to an iron gate, which was once gilt and painted, and the sides of which are ornamented with spiked railings. Then the road winds towards the château, which is not yet visible, for it is hidden away in the foliage like a bird's nest, often turning aside to visit a stream or a fountain, an elegant kiosk, or a spot from which a beautiful view is obtainable, and crossing and recrossing the river over Chinese or rustic bridges. The hilly nature of the ground and the dams made for the mill cause the river in several places to fall a distance of four or five feet, and nothing is more pleasant than to hear all these cascades purling close at hand, very often without being able to see them, for the rushes and osiers form an almost impenetrable screen. But all this part of the park is in some respects but the ante-room of the rest; a high-road which passes through the estate unfortunately divides it into two parts, but this inconvenience has been remedied in a very ingenious way. Two high walls, with battlements full of loopholes in imitation of a ruined fortress, stand one on either side of the road; a tower to which giant ivy clings on the château side drops with iron chains upon the bastion opposite a real drawbridge, and this bridge is let down every morning. Through a beautiful archway one can pass into the interior of the dungeon, and thence into the second domain, where the trees, which have not been cut for a century, are of extraordinary height, and having their gnarled trunks covered by parasite plants, are the strangest and most beautiful I have ever seen. Some have leaves only at the tops, which are umbrella-shaped; others taper in tufts; others, on the contrary, have not far from their roots a large clump, from which the bare trunk rises to the sky like a second tree planted in the first; such curious deformity do they display, that they seem like the drawings of an artificial landscape or theatrical scenery; ivy which trails from one to the other mingles its dark foliage with the green leaves, of which it seems to be the shadow. Nothing in the world is more icturesque. The river widens out at his spot to form a small lake, and its hallowness makes visible through the ransparent water the beautiful aquatic lants which carpet its bed. The châeau is on the other side, but a little oat, painted apple-green and bright ed, will save a long detour in search f the bridge. The mansion is a colection of buildings erected at differnt periods, with irregular gables and number of little bell-turrets.

In spite of a lack of regularity, or ather because of it, the appearance of the building is charming; at least t cannot all be seen at once; there is plenty of choice, and always something fresh to notice. This mansion, which I did not know, for it is twenty leagues away, at once took my fancy, and I realized at once Rosette's perfect taste and triumphant idea in selecting such a nest for our love.

We reached it at nightfall, and, as we were tired, after a hearty supper we had nothing better to do than to go to bed, for we intended to have a good night's rest.

My dreams were of a rose-colored nature, full of flowers, perfumes, and birds, when I felt a warm breath upon my forehead and a kiss descend upon my lips. The sound of the kiss and a sweet moisture upon my lips made me realize that I was not dreaming; I opened my eyes, and the first thing I saw was Rosette's fresh white neck as she leant over the bed to embrace me. I put my arm around her waist, and returned her kiss more lovingly than I had done for a long time.

She drew back the curtain and opened the window, and then sat down upon the edge of my bed, holding my hand in hers and playing with my rings. Her attire, which was most coquettish in its simplicity, made me regret that I was already her lover, and had not still to become so.

My dream at the moment she awakened me in such an agreeable fashion was not far removed from reality. My room looked out upon the little lake I described just now. Jessamine encircled my window, and shed its blossoms in a silver rain upon my floor; large foreign flowers blossomed upon my balcony; a sweet, faint perfume, composed of a thousand different scents, penetrated as far as my bed, from which I could see millions of drops of water shimmer and sparkle; the birds sang and twittered, there was a harmony of confused sounds like the noise at a fair. Facing me upon a hillside lit up by the sun stretched a meadow of a golden green, where a few oxen in the care of a small boy grazed here and there. Higher up and further away were visible immense patches of woods of a darker green, from which ascended in spirals the bluey smoke of charcoal-burners' fires.

The entire landscape was calm, fresh, and smiling, and wherever I turned my eyes, everything looked young and beautiful. My room was hung with tapestry and had mats upon the floor, while blue Japanese vases, large in the body with slim necks, full of strange flowers, were artistically arranged upon the shelves and marble mantelpieces; there were pictures, too, representing pastoral and rural scenes, and sofas and divans in every corner; then, last of all, there was a young and beautiful woman, all in white, whose flesh delicately tinted her transparent garment at the places where it touched her. Nothing could be imagined more conducive to the pleasure of the soul as well as the eye.

So my delightful eye travelled with equal pleasure from a magnificent vase, decorated with dragons and mandarins, to Rosette's slippers, and from there to the corner of her shoulder shining beneath the cambric; it rested upon the trembling blossoms of the jasmine and the willows on the river-bank, passed over the water and explored the hillside, and then returned into the room to become fixed upon the rose-colored knots of a shepherdess's long corset.

Through the gaps in the foliage the sky showed thousands of blue specks; the water babbled gently; and I gave way to the appreciation of all this joy in silence, plunged in a tranquil ecstasy, with my hand still clasped in Rosette's little hands.

The expression that happiness is red and white is a fine one; it can hardly be represented otherwise. Tender colors suit it well. There are only upon its palette a water-green, sky-blue, and a straw-colored yellow; its pictures are all in the light, like those of Chinese painters. Flowers, light perfumes, a silky and soft skin touching your own, veiled harmony, coming from you know not where, these things are quite enough for happiness; there is no different way of being happy. I, who have a horror of the commonplace, who dream of nothing but strange adventures, violent passions, delirious ecstasies, strange and difficult situations, am supremely happy in this fashion, and, with all my efforts, I have been unable to find any other.

I must ask you to believe that I did not then make any of these reflections; afterwards, when writing to you, they have come into my head; at that moment I was entirely wrapped up in my enjoyment—the only occupation of a reasonable man.

I will not describe to you the life we lead here; you can easily imagine it. There are walks in the great woods, violets and wild strawberries, kisses and little blue flowers, picnics on the grass, reading and books forgotten beneath the trees; excursions on the water with the end of a scarf or a white hand trailing in the stream, lengthy songs or peals of laughter re-echoed by the bank; we lead the most Arcadian life it is possible to imagine.

Rosette overwhelms me with caresses and attentions, more loving than a dove in the month of May, she winds herself around my heart, and entwines me in her coils; she tries to prevent me breathing any other atmosphere than her breath, or seeing any other horizon than her eyes; she besieges me very closely, and allows nothing to enter or leave without permission; she has built a little fortress by the side of my heart, from which she watches night and day. She uses the most loving expressions to me; she sings love-songs to me; she sits upon my knees, and behaves in my presence like a humble slave in the presence of her lord and master. Now this pleases me, for I love such submissive ways, as I have an inclination towards Oriental despotism. She does not take the slightest step without asking my advice, and seems to have made a complete abnegation of her own fancies and her own will: she tries to guess my thoughts and anticipate them; her tenderness and complaisance is absolutely wearying; she is perfection personified. How shall I be able to leave such an adorable woman without seeming like a monster? It will always be a discredit to my heart.

Oh! how I should like to find her out in a fault or a mistake! How impatiently I wait for an opportunity to quarrel! But there is no fear of the wretch giving me the chance! When, to provoke an altercation, I speak to her sharply, she answers me in such gentle tones, with such a silvery voice, with eyes so moist, an air so sad and so loving, that I seem to myself more like a tiger or a crocodile, and, though in a rage, I am forced to beg her pardon.

She literally assassinates me with love. She probably desires to make me tell her that I detest her, that she bores me to death, and that if she does not leave me alone I will strike her in the face with a whip. She will reduce me to this, if she continues to be so amiable, and it will not take long.

In spite of all this beautiful outward appearance, she is surfeited of me as I am of her; but, as she has committed the most egregious follies for me, she does not desire, in the eyes of the honorable corporation of sensible women, to put herself in the wrong by a rupture. Every grand passion pretends to be eternal, and it is very advantageous to reap the benefit of this eternity without having to endure its discomforts. Rosette argues like this: "Here is a young man who has only a slight taste remaining for me, and as he is naïve and good-natured, he does not dare openly to show it, and does know what wood to make the arrow; it is obvious that I bore him, but he will rather die of ennui than take upon himself to leave me. As he is something of a poet, he has a head full of beautiful phrases on love and passion, and believes himself obliged in his conscience to be a Tristan or an Amadis. Now, as nothing in the world is more unbearable than the caresses of a person for whom one's love has ceased (and to cease to love a woman is to hate her violently), I am going to lavish my favors upon him so as to satiate him in every way, or force him either to send me away or return to his former love for me, and the latter he will carefully refrain from doing.

Nothing could be better planned. Is it not charming to play the part of the forlorn Ariadne? She is pitied and admired, while there are not sufficient imprecations in the world to bestow upon the wretch who has been monstrous enough to abandon such an adorable creature. The lady assumes a sorrowful and resigned air, puts her hand beneath her chin and her elbow on her knee in such a way as to make the pretty blue veins upon her wrist stand out. Her hair is arranged in a more subdued fashion, and for a time she wears dresses of a darker shade. The wretch's name is studiously avoided, but roundabout illusions are made to him to an accompaniment of admirably modulated sighs.

A woman so good, so beautiful, and so passionate, who has made such great sacrifices, who is absolutely without reproach, a pearl of love, a polished mirror, a drop of milk, a white rose, an ideal essence to perfume a life; a woman who ought to be worshipped on bended knee, and, after death, should be cut up into small pieces as holy relics! How can a man desert such a one basely, fraudulently, and ungratefully? A pirate could not do worse! It is like striking her a death-blow! for she will most certainly die. A man must have a stone in the place of a heart to behave in such a way.

O men! men!

I say to myself: "But perhaps it is not true."

Great comediennes though women are by nature, I can hardly believe them as great as that, and after all, are Rosette's demonstrations the exact expression of her sentiments for me? Whatever the case may be, the continuation of our *tête-à-tête* is no longer possible, and the beautiful Lady of the Manor has at least issued invitations to her neighbors. We are engaged in preparing for the reception of these worthy country-folk. Good-by, old friend.

Chapter V

BEAUTY

I was mistaken. My wicked heart, incapable of love, imagined the reason to free itself from the weight of a gratitude it did not wish to bear; I had joyfully seized upon that idea to excuse myself in my own eyes; I clung to it, but nothing in the world was more false. Rosette was not playing a part, and if ever a woman was true, she is that one. Ah well! I am almost angry with her for the sincerity of her passion, for it is one more tie, and renders a rupture even more difficult and less excusable; I would prefer that she were false and flighty. What a singular position to be in! I should like to go away, yet I stay; I should like to say, "I hate you"; yet I say, "I love you." My past pushes me forward, and prevents me from turning back or from stopping. I am faithful, with regrets for being so. I do not know what sort of shame it is which entirely prevents my engaging in other love affairs, and compels me to enter into a composition with myself; I give to one all that I can, while maintaining appearances, steal from the other; the time and opportunities of meeting, which formerly arose so naturally, now only occur with difficulty. I begin to remember that I have important business. Such a situation as the above is very painful, but is not as bad as the one I am in. When a new friendship attracts one from the old it is easier to free oneself. Hope smiles sweetly at a man from the threshold of the house containing his young love. An illusion, fairer and more rosy, hovers with white wings over the freshly closed tomb of a sister just dead; another flower, more beautiful and scented, upon which trembles a heavenly tear, has suddenly blossomed from among the dead petals of the old bouquet; beautiful azure perspectives open before one; moist and quiet avenues stretch away to the horizon; there are gardens with pale statues, or benches standing near an ivy-covered wall, meadows studded with marguerites, narrow balconies where people lean and gaze at the moon, shady nooks intersected by furtive lights, drawing-rooms with the daylight excluded by their ample curtains;

ll the darkness and isolation sought y the love which dare not display self is there. A feeling like a new youth comes. There is something else besides the change of places, habits, and persons; there is a feeling of remorse. But the desire which hovers around one's head, like a bee in the spring, prevents its voice from being heard; the void in the heart is filled, and memories are effaced by impressions. But in this case it is not the same thing; I love no one, and it is only out of weariness and ennui of myself rather than of her that I wish to break with Rosette.

My former ideas, which had been somewhat allayed, have become more pronounced than before. I am, as formerly, tormented with a desire to have mistress, and, as before, even in Rosette's arms, I doubt whether I have ever had one. I see again the fair dame at her window in her park in the days of Louis XIII, and the lady following the chase on her white horse at a gallop through the forest rides. My ideal beauty smiles at me from the clouds, while I think I can recognize her voice in the song of the birds and the murmur of the foliage; I seem to be called on all sides, and the daughters of the air appear to brush my face with their invisible scarves. Just as in the days of my agitation, I think that if I set off at once and go somewhere far away, and very quickly, I shall reach a place where something is taking place which concerns me and where my destiny is decided. I feel that I am impatiently expected in some corner of the earth, I know not where. A suffering soul eagerly calls, and dreams of me without being able to come to me; that is the cause of my uneasiness and the reason I am unable to remain in my place; I am violently attracted outside my center. My nature is not one of those which lead others, one of those fixed stars around which the other lights revolve; I must wander through the firmament like an irregular meteor, till I meet the planet whose satellite I am designed to be, the Saturn to whom I must add my ring. Oh, when will this hymen take place? Till then I cannot hope for rest or my proper position, and I shall be like the needle of a compass seeking its pole.

I thought I could fly away from this treacherous birdlime with the loss of a feather or two, and I hoped to be able to take wing when I chose. Nothing is more difficult; I find that I am covered by an imperceptible net, more difficult to break than the one forged by Vulcan, and its meshes are so fine that escape is impossible. The net, too, is large, and I can move about inside it with what appears to be perfect freedom; it is scarcely noticeable till I try to break it; but then it resists, and becomes as solid as a brass wall.

What time have I wasted, O my ideal, without making the slightest effort towards your realization! How have I in cowardly fashion accepted my passing pleasure, and how little do I deserve to meet you!

Sometimes I think of forming another liaison, but I have no one in view; more often I propose, if I should succeed in breaking my bonds, to never again become entangled in such ties, and yet nothing justifies that resolution, for this affair has apparently been very happy, and I have not the slightest complaint in the world to make against Rosette. She has always been good to me, and no one could have behaved better; her fidelity has been exemplary, and has not even given ground for suspicion; the most observant and suspicious jealousy could have found nothing to arouse distrust. Jealousy could only be possible with regard to the past then, it is true, there would be very good grounds for it. But a jealousy of this sort is a delicacy fortunately rare, and there is usually enough in the present without searching among the relics of old passions to extract phials of poison and cups of bitterness. What woman could a man love if he thought of all that? In a confused fashion a man knows that a woman has had several lovers before him; but he tells himself—such tortuous windings and coils has a man's pride, that he is the first she has really loved, and it was by a combination of fatal circumstances she became entangled with persons unworthy of her, or else that hers was the vague desire of a heart which sought to satisfy itself, and which changed because the desire was not realized.

Perhaps it is only possible to really love a virgin both in body and in mind, a frail bud which has not been caressed by any zephyr, whose locked breast has neither received a rainspot nor a dewdrop, a chaste flower, which only displays its white robe for one alone, a beautiful lily with a silver bell, where desire has never yet dwelt, which has only been gilded by one sun, swayed by one breath, and watered by one hand. The brightness of midday is not so beautiful as the divine pallor of the dawn, and all the ardor of an experienced soul, well knowing life, yields to the celestial ignorance of a young heart awakening to love. Ah! how bitter and painful is the thought that one is wiping away the kisses of another, that there is, perhaps, no spot upon that brow, upon those lips, upon that throat, upon those shoulders, upon the whole of that body now one's own, which has not been reddened and marked by the lips of others; that those divine murmurs which come to the tongue's aid when words fail have already been heard; that those emotional senses have learned from another their ecstasy and delirium, and that deep down, far away in a remote corner of that soul, an inexorable memory watches and compares the pleasures of the past with those of today.

Although my natural nonchalance leads me to prefer highroads to unbeaten tracks, and the public drinking-fountain to the mountain spring, I must absolutely endeavor to love some virginal creature as white as the snow and as tremulous as the sensitive plant, one who only knows how to blush and lower her eyes; perhaps from this limpid stream into which no diver has yet descended I shall obtain a pearl of the first water, a worthy companion to Cleopatra's gem; but to do so I must break the tie which binds me to Rosette, or it is probably not with her that I shall realize this desire, and that I do not feel to have the strength to do.

Then too, if I must admit it, there is in my mind a secret and shameful motive which dare not be seen in broad daylight, but one which I must tell you, as I have promised to conceal nothing, and also for the reason that a confession to be meritorious must also be complete; this motive is of considerable moment in my uncertainty. If I break with Rosette, some time must of necessity elapse before I can replace her, however indulgent the class of women may be among whom I shall seek a successor, and I have acquired with her a habit of pleasure which it will be painful for me to suspend. It is quite true that there are courtesans, and formerly I loved them; but today they disgust me horribly and give me a nausea. So that alternative is out of the question, and I am so enervated by pleasure, the poison has become so deeply insinuated into my bones, that I cannot bear the idea of being one or two months without a mistress. That is egoism of the worst sort; but I think, if they would be straightforward, the most virtuous could confess to things of a similar character.

That is the strongest tie of all, and but for it Rosette and I would have parted long ago. Then, too, it is such a wearisome business, making love to a woman, that I do not feel equal to it. To begin over again all the charming nothings I have uttered so often; to write and reply to billets-doux; to see beauties home in the evening, perhaps miles away from one's own dwelling; to get cold feet and catch a chill at a window watching a beloved form; to calculate upon a sofa how many overlying tissues separate me from my goddess; to be the bearer of bouquets and a frequenter of balls in order to reach the position I am in at present, all this will be labor indeed! It is as well to remain in one's groove as to emerge from it and after much agitation and trouble to return to another precisely similar one. If I were in love matters would arrange themselves, and it would all appear delightful to me; but I am not, although I have the greatest possible desire to be; for after all, love is the only thing in the world; and then, if pleasure which is only its shadow has so much allurement for us, what must the reality be? In what ocean of ineffable ecstasy, in what lake of pure delight must those swim who have been struck by one of the gold-tipped arrows and burn with the ardor of love!

I feel by Rosette's side that flat calm, that idle comfort which results from the satisfaction of the senses, but nothing more, and it is not enough. Often the voluptuous dullness turns to torpor and the tranquillity to ennui; I then drift into objectless distractions and all sorts of insipid dreams which fatigue and exhaust me; it is a state from which I must emerge at any cost.

Oh! If I could be like some of my friends, who kiss an old glove with rapture, who are quite happy with a clasp of the hand, who would not exchange for a sultana's casket of jewels a few faded flowers half dried by the heat of the ball, who cover with tears and sew into their shirt next their heart a stupid and commonplace note, who adore women with large feet and make the excuse for it that they have beautiful souls! If I could follow, trembling with excitement, the folds of a dress, wait for a door to open in order to see a beloved form pass in a flood of light; if a word whispered quite low made me change color; if I had the virtue of sacrificing my dinner in order to reach a rendezvous earlier; if I were capable of stabbing a rival, or of fighting a duel with a husband; if, by Heaven's special grace, it were given to me to consider the ugly women clever, and the ugly and stupid women good; if I could decide to dance the minuet, and to listen to sonatas played by young people on the harpsichord or on the harp; in short, if I were a man and not a poet, I should certainly be much happier than I am; I should be less bored and less wearisome.

I have never asked of women but one thing, beauty; I willingly pass over the soul and mind. To me a woman who is beautiful is always clever; she has the mind to be beautiful, and I do not know how much that is worth. It requires many brilliant phrases and scintillating flashes of wit to equal the glances from a beautiful eye. I prefer a pretty mouth to a well-turned phrase, and a well-modelled shoulder to a virtue, even a theological virtue; I would give fifty souls for a tiny foot, and all the poesy and poets for the hand of Jeanne d'Aragon or the forehead of the Virgin of Foligno. I adore above all things beauty of form; beauty to me is visible Divinity, palpable happiness, it is heaven come down to earth. There are certain undulating contours, a certain beauty of the lips, an inclination of the head which delight me beyond all expression and take my attention for hours at a time.

Beauty, the only thing which cannot be acquired, always inaccessible to those who do not have it from the first; an ephemeral and fragile flower which grows without being sown, a pure gift from Heaven! O beauty! the most radiant diadem with which chance can crown a brow, you are admirable and precious like everything at man's door, like the azure of the firmament, like the gold of a star, like the perfume of the seraphic lily! A man can exchange his labor for a throne; he may conquer the world—many have done it; but who would not kneel down before you, were you the pure personification of the thought of God?

I only demand beauty, it is true; but I require such perfect beauty that I shall probably never meet with it. I have here and there seen in a few women admirable parts only moderately accompanied, and I have loved them for their special beauty, ignoring the rest; at all times it is a painful and grievous task to in this way suppress half of a mistress, and make a mental amputation of all that is ugly or common about her, by concentrating the eyes upon her beautiful points. Beauty is harmony, and a person equally ugly everywhere is often less disagreeable to look at than a woman who is unequally beautiful. Nothing gives me so much pain as to see an uncompleted masterpiece and a beauty which lacks something; an oil-stain is less obvious upon a common drugget than upon rich cloth.

Rosette is not bad. She might even pass as beautiful, but she is far from realizing my dream. She is a statue, several bits of which are very clearly developed. The others are not so striking; some parts are modelled with much skill and charm, while others are done in a more careless and loose fashion. To the ordinary observer the statue appears quite finished and complete in its beauty; but a more careful scrutiny soon discovers spots where the work is not concise enough, and contours which, to attain the purity proper to them, need the passing and repassing of the sculptor's finger many times.

Besides, I do not confine beauty within this or that sinuosity of lines. The manner, gestures, walk, breath, color, sound, perfume, in fact everything of which life consists, with me enters into the composition of beauty; everything which scents, sings, or gleams belongs to it by right. I love rich brocades, splendid stuffs, with their stiff, ample folds; I love large flowers, and their perfumes, the transparence of running water, and the glittering glory of beautiful weapons, thoroughbred horses, and those great white dogs we see in the pictures of Paul Veronese. I am a real pagan on this point, and I do not love the gods who are badly made. Although I am not at heart what might be called irreligious, no one in truth is a worse Christian than I am. I do not understand the mortification of matter which is the essence of Christianity; I consider it is a sacrilegious act to injure God's work, and I cannot believe that the flesh is evil, since He has fashioned it with His fingers in His own image. I have little esteem for the long, dark-colored garments from which only the head and two hands emerge, and those pictures where everything is buried in shadow except a gleaming forehead. I want the sun to enter everywhere, so that there may be the greatest possible amount of light and the least possible shadow. I like the sparkle of color, waving lines, the proud display of nudity, and no concealment of the existence of matter, since, like the mind, it is an eternal hymn in praise of God.

I can perfectly understand the mad enthusiasm of the Greeks for beauty; and on my own account I see nothing absurd in the law which obliged judges only to hear advocates' speeches in the dark, for fear that their handsome appearance, the grace of their gestures and attitudes should prejudice the judges in their favor, and bias their judgment.

I would not purchase anything from a merchant who was ugly; I give more freely to beggars whose rags and poverty are picturesque. There is a little restless Italian, sharp as a citron, with great black and white eyes which take up half his face, who always receives from me a penny more than the others. I would never hit a beautiful horse or fine dog, and I should not care for a friend or servant unless of agreeable appearance. It is a real punishment to me to see unpleasant things or ugly persons. A building in bad taste or an ill-shaped piece of furniture prevent me from being pleased in a house, however comfortable or attractive it may be in other respects. The best champagne seems to me almost like the commonest wine in an ill-shapen glass, and I must confess that I prefer the most Lacedæmonian broth in a china plate to the finest dish in an earthenware platter. Outside appearances have always had great weight with me, and that is the reason I always avoid the company of the aged; they sadden me and disagreeably affect me because they are wrinkled and deformed, though some have a special beauty; and in the pity I feel for them there is much disgust: of all the ruins in the world, the ruin of man is certainly the saddest to comtemplate.

If I were a painter (and I have always regretted that I am not) I would only people my canvases with goddesses, nymphs, Madonnas, cherubim, and Cupids. The consecration of one's brushes to the painting of portraits, unless of good-looking people, appears to me to be a crime against art; and far from desiring to copy ugly or ignoble faces, vulgar or insignificant heads, I would prefer to cut off the originals. The ferocity of a Caligula devoted in this direction would almost seem to me praiseworthy.

The only thing in the world I have envied is to be beautiful. I mean the beauty of a Paris or an Apollo. Not to be deformed, the possession of somewhat regular features, that is to say with a nose in the middle of the face, neither flat-nosed nor crooked-nosed, eyes neither red nor bloodshot, and a mouth of the proper size, is not beauty. If it were I should be beautiful, and yet I find myself as far from my ideal of manly beauty as if I were one of those figures which strike the hours upon bells; I should have a mountain upon each shoulder, the twisted legs of a dachshund, and the nose and muzzle of the monkey I should so much resemble. Many times have I looked at myself in a mirror for hours at the time, with a fixity and attention impossible to imagine, to see if any improvement has taken place in my face. I still hope that some spring or another I shall get rid of my present appearance, like a snake shedding its old skin. To think that it would take so little to make me handsome, and yet I never shall be. What difference would it make to the atoms composing me if they were crystallized in some other way? What difference would it make to a curve if it were altered, and where was the necessity for me as I am and not otherwise? Really, if I were to hold Fate by the throat, I think I should show no mercy. Because it pleased a miserable parcel of something to fall somewhere and clumsily coagulate into the ugly face I possess, I shall be eternally unhappy! Is it not the most foolish and miserable fate in the world? How does it come to pass that my soul, with the ardent desire which consumes it, cannot let fall the poor carrion which it holds upright, and animate one of those statues whose exquisite beauty saddens and delights it? There are two or three persons whom I would gladly murder, taking care not to disfigure them, if I possessed the secret of transferring a soul from one body to the other. It has always seemed to me that to do what I desire (and I do not know what that is) I need a great and perfect beauty, and I imagine that if I possessed it my life, which is so entangled and so worried, would have been complete.

So many beautiful faces are to be seen in pictures. Why is not mine one of them? There are so many charming heads which disappear beneath the dust and smoke of time in the old galleries! Would it not be better for them to leave their frames and come to rest upon my shoulders?

My first sensation before one of those marvelous heads, whose painted gaze seems to penetrate one and ex end into infinity, is a feeling of admiration not unaccompanied by terror; my eyes become moist, my heart beats; then, when I am a little familiarized with the picture, and have entered more deeply into the secret of its beauty, I tacitly compare it to myself. Jealousy writhes deep down in my soul in knots more twisted than a viper, and I have the greatest difficulty in preventing myself from rushing at the canvas and tearing it to bits.

To be beautiful is to have in yourself a charm which makes every one smile upon you and receive you; before you speak everybody is already prejudiced in your favor and disposed to be of your opinion; you have only to pass along a street or show yourself upon a balcony to create in the crowd friends or mistresses. Not to require to be amiable to be loved, to be spared all the expenditures of cleverness and complaisance to which ugliness obliges you, and of those thousand moral qualities it is necessary to have to supply the place of bodily beauty, prove what a splendid and magnificent gift beauty is.

What could a man desire more than to combine with extraordinary beauty supreme strength, to conceal beneath the skin of Antinous the muscles of Hercules? I am sure that with those two things and the soul I have, in less than three years I should be Emperor of the World! Another thing I have desired almost as much as beauty and strength is the gift of transporting myself as quickly as thought from one place to another. With an angel's beauty, a tiger's strength, and an eagle's wings, I should begin to find that the world is not as badly organized as I first believed it to be. A beautiful mask to seduce and fascinate the prey, wings to pounce upon it and carry it off, and talons to tear it; till I have those three things I shall be unhappy.

Every passion and taste I have felt has only been a form of one of these three desires. I have loved arms, horses, and women: arms to replace the nerves I do not possess; horses to serve as wings; women to possess at least in some one the beauty I myself lack. I sought out from preference weapons which were most ingeniously deadly and those whose wounds were incurable. I never had occasion to make use of any of these creeses or yataghans, yet I love to have them around me. I draw them from the sheath with a feeling of security and inexpressible strength, I thrust and parry with them most energetically, and if by chance I catch sight of my face in a mirror I am astonished at its ferocious expression. As for horses, I override them so that they die. If I had not given up riding Farragus he would have been dead long ago, and that would have been a pity, for he is a fine animal. What Arab steed could have legs as swift and supple as my desire? With women I have only sought the exterior, and as up to the present those I have seen are very far from approaching my idea of beauty, I have fallen back on pictures and statues, which, after all, is a pitiable expedient when a person has such inflamed sensibilities as mine. Still there is something great and beautiful in loving a statue, for one's love is perfectly disinterested, and neither the satiety nor the disgust of victory is to be feared, nor can one reasonably expect a second prodigy like the story of Pygmalion. The impossible has always pleased me.

Is it not strange that I who am still in the fairest months of youth, who far from abusing everything have not even used the simplest things, have come to such a degree of ennui as to be only gratified by the strange or difficult? Satiety follows pleasure, that is a natural and quite intelligible law. For a man who has feasted to be no longer hungry, and to seek to arouse his palate by spices of irritant wines, is easy of explanation; but for a man who sits down to table, but hardly tastes the first course, to be seized with such superb disgust as to be unable to touch the finest dishes without vomiting, is a phenomenon which can only arise from a particular organization; it is like a child six months old finding its nurse's milk insipid and only wishing to partake of brandy. I am as weary as if I had accomplished all the marvels of Sardanapalus, and yet my life has been very chaste and tranquil in appearance. It is a mistake to think that possession is the only road which leads to satiety. Desire too has the same effect, and abstinence exhausts more than excess. A desire like mine is more fatiguing than possession. Its gaze surveys and penetrates the object it wishes to have more promptly and profoundly than if it were actually touched. What more would practice teach? What experience can equal such constant and passionate contemplation?

I have engaged in so many pursuits though I have not traveled far, and it is only the steepest peaks which tempt me now. I am attacked by that malady which comes upon powerful men in the old age: the impossible. Everything I can do has not the least charm for me. Tiberius, Caligula, and Nero, mighty Romans of the Empire, you who have been so greatly misunderstood, and whom the pack of rhetoricians pursued with their yelps, I suffer from your malady, and I pity you with all the pity I have remaining in me! I too would like to build a bridge across the sea and pave the waves; I have dreamt of the burning of cities to illuminate my feasts; I have desired to be a woman to experience fresh pleasures. Your golden house, Nero, is but a dirty stable compared with the palace I have built for myself; my wardrobe is better equipped than yours, Heliogabalus, and splendid in a different fashion. My circuses are more noisy and bloodstained than yours, my perfumes stronger and more penetrating, while my slaves are more numerous and better built; I too have attached to my chariot naked courtesans, and I have walked upon men with a tread as disdainful as yours. Colossus of the ancient world, there beats within my weak frame a heart as great as yours, and had I been in your place I should have done the same, and perhaps more. How many Babels have I heaped up one upon the other to reach heaven, to strike the stars and spit down upon creation! Why then am I not God, since I cannot be a man?

Oh! I think I shall require a hundred thousand centuries of oblivion to rest me from the fatigues of my twenty years of life. God of heaven, what stone will You roll upon me, in hat shadow will You plunge me, at hat Lethe will You make me drink, eneath what mountain will You inter ie Titan? Am I destined to turn y mouth into a volcano, and when turn over be the cause of earthuakes?

When I think of it, and that I was orn of a sweet, resigned mother, with uch simple tastes and habits, I am urprised that she can have contained ie. How has it happened that none f her calm, pure thoughts have been ransferred to my body with the blood ne gave me? Why am I the son of er flesh only, not of her mind? The ove has brought forth a tiger, dering the whole of creation as its prey.

I have lived in the calmest and most haste environment. It is difficult to ream of an existence enshrined with uch purity as mine. My years were pent under a mother's wing with my ttle sisters and the house dog. I only aw around me the good and gentle aces of the servants who had grown rey in a service which was often heeditary, relatives or friends, grave and houghtful, dressed in black, who laced their gloves one by one beside heir hats; I had a few aunts of unertain age, plump, neat, discreet, with potless linen, grey skirts, net mittens, nd their hands upon their waist-belts ke people of a religious turn of mind; he furniture of plain oak was so seere as to be almost mournful, the angings were of leather, the whole omprising just such a somber and tifling interior as certain Flemish masers paint. The garden was damp and ark; the box which divided it into ections, the ivy covering the walls, nd a few fir trees were charged with the representation of verdure, and succeeded badly enough; the brick house, with a very high roof, although spacious and in good condition, had something mournful and drowsy about it. Really, nothing could be more suitable to a separate, austere, and melancholy life than such a dwelling. It seemed impossible for all the children brought up in such a house not to become priests and nuns. Oh well, in this atmosphere of purity and repose, in this shadow and seclusion, I rotted bit by bit, without giving any outward sign, like a medlar on the straw. In the bosom of this honest, pious, and holy family I attained to a horrible degree of depravity. It was not the contact of the world, because I had not seen life, nor the fire of passion, since I was paralyzed under the cold sweat which oozed from the strong walls. The maggot had not gone from the heart of another fruit to my heart. It had hatched of itself, and nothing from outside showed and warned me that I was spoiled. I had neither blemish nor hole; but I was quite hollow within. Is it not an inexplicable thing that a child born of virtuous parents, brought up with care and discretion, kept far away from all bad influence, can be perverted to such an extent and reach the state of mind I have done? I am sure that even by going back to the sixth generation it would not be possible to find among my ancestors a single atom like those of which I am composed. I am not a member of my family; I am not a branch of the noble trunk, but a poisonous fungus which sprang up one stormy night from amid its mossy roots. And yet no one has had more aspirations and impulses towards the beautiful than I, no one has tried more resolutely to unfold his wings; but each attempt has made me fall further, and that which ought to have been my salvation has been my ruin.

Solitude is worse for me than life, though I desire the first rather than the other. Everything which takes me out of myself is beneficial; society bores me, but drags me from my empty reverie. For that reason, since our *tête-à-tête* is disturbed, and there are people here with whom I am forced to restrain myself a little, I am less subject to giving way to my black humors, and I am less tortured by those unreasonable desires which fasten upon my heart like a flock of vultures as soon as I am idle for a moment. There are one or two rather pretty women, and one or two gay and jolly fellows; but among all these country-folk the one who pleases me most is a young gentleman who arrived two or three days ago; he pleased me from the first, and I opened my heart to him as I watched him dismount from his horse. It is impossible to be more graceful; he is not very tall, but slender and well developed; there is something soft and undulating in his gait and gestures, which could not possibly be more agreeable; while many women would envy him his hands and feet. His only fault is being too good-looking and having too delicate features for a man. He is blessed with a pair of the blackest and most beautiful eyes in the world, with an indefinable expression in them and a look hard to bear; but as he is young and has no sign of a beard, the softness and perfection of the lower part of his face temper a little the vivacity of his eagle eyes; his brown shining hair hangs upon his neck in big curls, which give his head a particular character. Here then is one of the types of beauty of which I dreamed realized and walking in my presence! What a pity that he is a man, or that I am not a woman! This Adonis, who with his good-looking face has a keen and far-reaching intelligence, enjoys the advantage of having at the disposal of his wit a silvery and penetrating voice which it is difficult to hear without emotion. He is really perfect. It seems that he shares my taste for beauty, for his clothes are very rich and elaborate, and his horse is a very frisky and well-bred animal; and, to complete the picture, he was followed, mounted on a pony, by a page, fourteen or fifteen years of age, fair, rosy, and pretty as a seraph, who was half asleep and so tired by his ride that his master was obliged to lift him from the saddle and carry him to his room in his arms. Rosette gave him a most hearty reception, and I think she has planned to make use of him to arouse my jealousy, and thus fan into flame the smouldering ashes of my dying passion. Very dangerous though such a rival must be, I am but little disposed to be jealous, and I feel so drawn towards him that I would willingly desist from my love to have his friendship.

Chapter VI

A PLEASING PICTURE

Here, if the easy-going reader will permit, we will for a time abandon to his reveries the worthy person who up to this time has occupied the stage by himself and spoken for himself, and return to the ordinary form of story, without preventing its taking the dramatic form where necessary, and reserving to ourself the right of again borrowing the sort of epistolary confession that the above young man addressed to his friend.

The little page was so weary that he slept in his master's arms, and his little head wagged to and fro as if he were dead. It was some distance from the door to the room destined for the new arrival, and the servant who conducted him offered to carry the child; but the young fellow, who did not seem to feel the weight of his burden, thanked him without accepting his offer; he put the child gently down upon the couch, taking a thousand precautions not to awaken him; a mother could not have done more. When the servant had retired and the door was shut, he dropped down upon his knees and tried to remove his boots; but the little tired and swollen feet rendered this operation difficult, and from time to time the pretty sleeper uttered vague and inarticulate cries, like a person about to awaken; then the young fellow stopped and waited till he had gone to sleep again. At last the boots yielded, and then the stockings made but a poor resistance. After this operation the master took the child's two feet and placed them side by side upon the velvet of the sofa; they were the two most adorable feet in the world, white as new ivory and somewhat rosy from the pressure of the boots which had imprisoned them for seventeen hours; they were too tiny feet even for a woman, and seemed never to have walked; the visible part of the leg was round, plump, polished, transparent, veined, and of the most exquisite delicacy; a leg worthy of the foot.

The young man, still on his knees, contemplated the two little feet with amorous admiration; he leant over, took the left and kissed it, and then the right. The page opened his eyes, and gave his master a tired and grateful glance, which betrayed no surprise. "My sash hurts me," he said, as he put his finger under the ribbon and then fell fast asleep. The master unfastened the sash, raised the page's head with a cushion, and touching his feet, which were becoming a little cooler, carefully wrapped them in his cloak, took a chair, and sat down as near the sofa as possible. Two hours passed in this way, the young man watching the child sleep, and following upon his forehead the shadows of his dreams. The only sound in the room was the regular breathing and the tick of the clock.

It was certainly a very pleasing picture. In the contrast of these two sorts of beauty there was an effect of which a clever painter would have made the greatest use. The master was as beautiful as a woman, the page as a young girl. The round and rosy head amid its hair was like a peach in its leaves; it had the freshness and softness, although the fatigue of the journey had taken away some of its usual brilliance; the half-open mouth showed little milk-white teeth, and beneath the full shining temples a network of azure veins appeared; the eyelashes, like the threads of gold around the virgins' heads in a missal, came almost to the middle of the cheeks; his long and silky hair had at the same time gold and silver tints in it—gold in the shadow and silver in the light; his neck was at once fat and frail, and had nothing of the sex indicated by the clothes about it; two or three buttons of the undershirt, undone to facilitate respiration, gave a glimpse of a square of plump and chubby flesh of admirable whiteness, and the beginning of a certain curve difficult to explain on the breast of a boy; on looking closely, it might have been also observed that the hips were a little too pronounced. The reader can think what he pleases; these are simply conjectures, for we know no more about it than he does, but we hope to learn more shortly, and we faithfully promise to make him aware of our discoveries.

The gentleman was pale, but it was a golden pallor, full of strength and life; his blue eyes and his straight, slender nose gave to his profile marvelous pride and vigor; his mouth at certain times had the sweetest of smiles, but usually it was curved at the corners, just as on those heads to be seen in the paintings of some of the old Italian masters, rather within than without; the effect of this was to give an adorably disdainful expression, and an air of childish pouting and ill humor, very strange and very charming.

What were the ties which united the master to the page and the page to the master? Assuredly there was more between them than the affection existing between master and servant. Were they two friends or two brothers? Then why this disguise? It would have been difficult for any one who saw the scene we have just described to believe that these two persons were what they appeared to be.

"How the dear angel sleeps," said the young man in a low voice, "I don't believe he ever traveled so far before. Twenty leagues on horseback; I am afraid it will make him ill with fatigue, for he is so delicate. No, by to-morrow all trace will have departed; he will have recovered his healthy color, and be fresher than a rose after the rain. How beautiful he is. If I were not afraid of waking him I would eat him up with caresses. What an adorable dimple he has on his chin! How fine and white his skin is! Sleep well, my treasure. Ah! I am really jealous of your mother, and I should like to have known her. Is he ill? No; his breathing is regular and he does not move. I think there was a knock at the door."

In reality there had been two taps, as gentle as possible, at the door.

The young man got up and, fearing he was mistaken, before opening the door waited for another knock. Two other taps, a little louder, sounded, and a sweet woman's voice whispered, "It is I, Theodore."

Theodore opened the door, but with less alacrity than a young man usually displays in opening to a woman whose voice is sweet and who has come mysteriously to tap at his door towards nightfall. The door opened to admit Rosette in person, more rosy than her name, with as fluttering a heart as a woman ever had on entering the room of a good-looking gentleman.

"Theodore," Rosette said.

Theodore raised a finger, placing it to his lips like a statue of silence, and, pointing to the sleeping child, led her into the next room.

"Theodore," Rosette resumed, appearing to find singular pleasure in repeating the name. "Theodore," she peated, still holding the hand the ung man had offered her as he concted her to a seat, "have you come ck at last? What have you been ing all this time? Where have you en? Do you know it is six months nce I saw you last? Ah! Theodore, at is not right; you owe to a person no loves you, though you do not love r, a little regard and pity."

"What have I done?" he replied. "I rdly know. I have been away and me back, I have slept and watched, ng and wept, I have been hungry and irsty, I have been too hot and too ld, I have been bored, I have less oney and am six months older; I have ved, that is all. And what have you en doing?"

"I have loved you," Rosette an-wered.

"Is that all you have done?"

"Absolutely, yes. I have employed y time badly, have I not?"

"You might have employed your time etter, my poor Rosette; for example, y loving some one who could return our love."

"I am disinterested in love, as in verything else," Rosette retorted. "I o not let out my love on loan; I make pure gift of it."

"In that you have a very rare virtue, ne only born in a chosen soul," Theoore replied. "I have very often wished be able to love you, at least as you esire but there is between us an inrmountable obstacle which I cannot t you know. Have you had another ver while I have been away?"

"I have one still."

"What sort of a man is he?"

"A poet."

"What sort of a poet is he, and what has he done?"

"I hardly know, a sort of volume no one understands, which I tried to read one evening."

"So you have an unpublished poet for a lover. That should be curious. Is he out at elbow? Does he wear dirty linen?"

"No, he dresses well, washes his hands, and has no ink-spots at the end of his nose. He is a friend of C., whom I met at Madame de Thémine's house; you know her, a big woman who affects childish ways and gives herself little innocent airs."

"May I be allowed to ask the name of this glorious person?"

"Yes, certainly. He is the Chevalier d'Albert."

"Surely that was the young man who was on the balcony when I dismounted?"

"Quite right."

"Who looked at me so attentively."

"The same."

"He is a good-looking fellow. So he has not made you forget me?"

"No. Unfortunately, you are not the sort of person one forgets."

"No doubt he loves you very dearly?"

"I can hardly say. There are times when one would think he loved me very dearly; but at heart he does not love me, and he is not far off hating me. He has done just as several other more experienced people: he has acquired a keen appetite for passion, and has been very surprised and disappointed when his love has been assuaged. It is a mistake to think that because people are lovers they adore one another."

"What do you propose doing with this so-called lover who does not love?"

"Just the same as is done with last year's fashions. He is not strong enough to leave me first, and although he does not love me in the real sense of the word, he clings to me from a habit of pleasure, and those ties are the most difficult to break. If I do not help him, he is capable of conscientiously staying with me till the Judgment Day, and even beyond that; for he has the germ of every noble quality, and the flowers of his soul only need expanding in the sunshine of eternal love. Really I am annoyed at not being that sunlight to him. Of all the lovers I have not loved, he is the one I have loved most; and if I were not as good as I am, I should not restore his liberty, and I should still keep him. That I will not do; I have just finished making use of him."

"How much longer will it last?" Theodore asked.

"A fortnight or three weeks, but certainly less than it would have lasted if you had not come. I know that I shall never be your mistress. There is, you say, an unknown reason, to which I should submit if you were allowed to disclose it to me. So although all hope in that direction is forbidden, I cannot decide to be the mistress of another when you are here; it seems to me like profanity, and makes me think that I no longer have the right to love you."

"Keep him for the love of me."

"If it will give you pleasure, I will do so. Ah! if you could have been mine, how different my life would have been! The world has a very false idea of me, and I should have passed out of sight without any one suspecting what I was, except you, Theodore, the only one who has understood me and treated me cruelly. I have never desired any one but you for my lover, and you I have not had. If you had loved me, Theodore, I should have been virtuous and chaste, I should have been worthy of you; instead of that I shall leave (if any one at all recollects me) a reputation for gallantry, as a sort of courtesan, who only differed from the rest because of my rank and wealth. I was born with the most noble inclinations; but nothing depraves a person as much as not being loved. Those despise me who do not know what I have suffered in reaching my present state. Sure of never belonging to the man I preferred above all others, I let myself go with the stream, I have not taken the trouble to defend a body which could not belong to you. No one has had my heart, or ever will. It is yours, although you have broken it; and, different from most women who call themselves honorable, provided they have not gone too far, I have always been faithful in heart and soul to the thought of you. At least I shall have made a few happy; I shall have made white illusions dance around a few pillows. I have innocently deceived more than one noble heart; I have been so miserable at being repulsed by you, that I have always been terrified at the idea of inflicting a similar punishment on some one else. That is the sole motive of many of the adventures which have been attributed to a mere spirit of licentiousness. Licentiousness in me! If you knew, Theodore, how profoundly painful it is to feel that one's life has been a failure, that happiness has passed by on one side, to see that people misunderstand without its being possible to change their opinion, that one's most beautiful qualities are converted into vices and purest essences into black poisons, that one's evil side has been the only one viewed; to have found the door always open for one's vices and always closed for the virtues, and to be unable to bring to perfection, among so many weeds, a single lily or rose! You do not know how painful it is, Theodore!"

"Alas! alas! Rosette, your words are the history of the whole world; the better part of us is the part remaining in us, which we cannot produce. Poets are like that. Their most beautiful verses are the ones they have not written; they carry more poems to their grave than they leave in their library."

"I shall bear my poem with me."

"And so shall I; who have not composed one in my life. Who is so happy or wretched as not to have created one in his heart?"

"Yes! I could have white roses placed upon my tomb. I have had ten lovers, but my heart is virgin, and will remain. Many maidens upon whose graves there is a never-ending shower of jasmine and orange blossoms were veritable Messalinas."

"I know what you are worth, Rosette."

"You alone in the world know what I am, Theodore, for you have seen me beneath the shock of a love which is deep and true, since it is without hope; and he who has not seen a woman in love cannot say what she is; that is what consoles me in my bitterness."

"What do you think of this young man who, in the eyes of the world, is your lover?"

"A lover's thoughts are deeper than the ocean, and it is very hard to say what there is at the heart of a man. The lead might be attached to a hundred thousand fathoms of line without touching bottom. Yet I have touched bottom in a few places, and the sounding apparatus has brought up sometimes mud, sometimes beautiful shells, but more often mud and bits of coral mixed together. His opinion of me has varied very much; he has begun where others left off, he despised me; young fellows with vivid imaginations are subject to that. There is always an enormous fall in the first step they take, and the passing from their chimera to reality cannot happen without a shock. He despised me and I amused him; now he esteems me and I bore him. In the early days of our liaison he only saw the banal side of me, and I think the certainty of not encountering resistance was of great weight in his determination. He appeared extremely anxious to have a love affair, and I at first thought his was one of those plenitudes of the heart which only seek an outlet; one of those vague loves youth has in the month of May, which are such that, failing women, arms would go round the trunks of trees, and kisses be showered upon the flowers and grass in the meadows. But it was not that; it passed through me to reach another end. I was a path for him and not an end. Beneath the freshness of his twenty years of age, beneath his youthful mustache, he concealed a profound corruption. He was punctured in the heart; he was like a fruit containing nothing but ashes. In his young and vigorous body a soul as old as Saturn was at work. I admit, Theodore, that I was frightened, and vertigo almost overcame me as I leant over the black depths of this existence. Your sorrows and mine are as nothing compared to them. If I had loved him more I should have killed him. Something attracts and imperatively calls him, something which is not of or in this world, and he can have no rest day or night. He is one of the men whose souls have not been dipped completely enough in the waters of Lethe before being attached to the body, for it retains of the sky from whence it comes, memories of eternal beauty which work and torment it, and remembers that it once had wings and has now only feet. If I were God, I would deprive of poetry for two eternities the angel guilty of such negligence. I was no match for this, I appeared not to have understood, and I let him crawl upon his wings and seek a peak from which to launch himself into space. He thinks that I noticed nothing of all that, because I lent myself to all his caprices without appearing to suspect the object. I wished, being unable to cure him—I hope that it will be one day taken into account before God—to give him at least the happiness of thinking he had been passionately loved. He inspired me with sufficient interest and pity to be easily able to adopt a tone and manners tender enough to deceive him. I played my part like a consummate actress; I was gay and sad, sensible and voluptuous by turns; I feigned uneasiness and jealousy; I shed false tears, and I summoned to my lips a host of pleasant smiles. I arrayed this manikin of love in the most gorgeous attire; I made him walk in the avenues of my park; I invited all my birds to sing as he passed, and all my flowers to bend their heads in salutation; I made him cross my lake upon the silvery back of my beloved swan; I hid myself within, and I lent him my voice, my mind, my beauty, my youth, and I gave him so seductive an appearance, that the reality was not equal to my sham. When the time comes to shatter the hollow statue, I shall do it, in order to spare him remorse, in such a way that he will believe that all the fault is on my side. I shall be the one to make the hole through which the gas filling the balloon may escape. Is it not a holy deception and honorable fraud? I have in a crystal urn a few tears I gathered just as they were about to fall. That is my casket of jewels and diamonds, and I will present them to the angel who comes to take me into the presence of God."

"They are more beautiful," Theodore answered, "than those which gleam at any woman's neck. A queen's ornaments are not their equal. Who will do for you what you have done for him?"

"No one, alas, since you cannot."

"O dear soul! it is impossible! But do not lose hope. You are beautiful, and still very young. You have many avenues of limes and flowering acacias to traverse before reaching that moist road, bordered by bushes and leafless trees, which leads from the tomb of porphyry, where your beautiful dead years will be interred, to the mossy stone sepulcher where your remains will be hastily bestowed, with the wrinkled and tottering specters of the days of your old age. There is much left of the mountain of life for you to climb, and it will be a long while before you reach the zone of perpetual snow. You are only in the sphere of aromatic plants, of limpid cascades where the iris hangs in multi-colored arches, of beautiful green oaks and sweet-smelling larches. Climb still a little higher, and from that point, in the wider horizon outstretched before you, you will perhaps see the bluish smoke rising from the roof which covers the man who will love you. One must not from the first despair of life; it always opens in this fashion in our destiny with visions of the unexpected. The life of man has often made me think of a pilgrim who ascends the winding stair of a Gothic tower. The long granite serpent twines in the darkness its coils, each scale of which is a step. After a few turns, the gleam of daylight coming from the doorway is blotted out. The shadow of the houses, not yet overtopped, does not allow the airholes to admit the sun; the walls are black and humid; it is more like descending into a dungeon never again to emerge, than ascending a tower which from the earth appears so lofty and slender, and with its carving and tracery, as if it is in holiday dress. The ascent is made hesitatingly, so depressing is its damp darkness. A few more turns of the staircase, and more frequent lights outline the golden trefoils upon the opposite wall. The jagged gables of the houses, the carving of the entablatures, and the strange shapes of the chimneys come into view; a few steps further, and the eye looks down upon the entire city; it is a forest of pinnacles, spires, and towers, which bristle on all sides. The domes and cupolas are rounded like the breasts of a giantess or the skulls of Titans. The blocks of houses and palaces are separated by bright or shady streets. A few steps more and you will be on the platform; then you will see beyond the environs of the city the green of the pastures, the blueness of the hills, and the white veil over the river. Dazzling sunlight overwhelms you, and the swallows pass and repass close at hand, uttering little joyful cries. The far-off sound of the city comes to you like a friendly murmur or the buzzing of a hive of bees; the breeze bears to you the odors of the neighboring forest and the flowers on the mountain; there is nothing but light, harmony, and perfume. If you had become weary and had remained seated upon a lower step, or had turned back, this view would have been entirely lost to you. Sometimes the tower has but a single opening in the middle or at the top. The tower of our life is built in that way; then it requires more obstinate courage and more desperate perseverance to cling in the darkness to the projections of the stones, to obtain a view of the surrounding country; or else the loopholes have been filled up, or perhaps they have been forgotten altogether, and then it is necessary to climb to the summit; but the higher in the darkness, the more immense does the horizon seem and the greater the surprise and pleasure."

"Oh, Theodore," Rosette replied, "God grant that I may soon reach the place where the window is! Long have I climbed the spiral staircase in the blackest darkness; but I fear the opening has been filled up and I must climb to the summit; and suppose this staircase with its never-ending steps terminates in nothing but a walled-up doorway or an arched stone roof?"

"Don't say that. Rosette; do not even

think it. What architect would construct a staircase with no outlet? Why suppose the peaceful designer of the world to be more stupid or shortsighted than an ordinary architect? God makes no mistakes and forgets nothing. It is impossible to believe that it would amuse Him to enclose you in a long stone tube without outlet or opening. Why do you think, poor mice that we are, He will grudge us a miserable minute's happiness. He would feel the ferocity of a tiger or a judge; and if we displease Him so much, He has only to tell a comet to turn a little from its course, and strangle us with a hair of its tail. Courage, Rosette, courage! If you are out of breath, stop a while to recover, and then continue your ascent; you have perhaps only twenty steps to ascend to reach the embrasure from which you will see your happiness."

"Never, oh, never! and if I reach the top of the tower it will only be to throw myself from it."

"Drive away, poor sufferer, these sinister ideas which hover around you like bats and cast the dark shadow of their wings over your beautiful forehead. If you want me to love you, be happy and do not weep."

He drew her to him and kissed her upon the eyes as he said this.

"What a misfortune for me to have met you!" Rosette replied; "and yet, were I to have my time over again I should wish to know you. Your harshness has been sweeter to me than other men's passion; and although you have made me suffer greatly, all my pleasure has come from you; through you I have caught a glimpse of what I might have been. You have been a light in my darkness, and you have lit up many of the dark places in my soul; you have opened up new vistas in my life. I owe to you the fact that I have known love —an unhappy love, it is true; but there is in loving without being loved a profound and melancholy charm, and it is beautiful to call to mind those who forget us. It is a form of happiness to be able to love even when one is alone in that love, and many die without it, so that often the most to be pitied are not those who love."

"They suffer and feel the pain of their wounds, but they at least live; they have something to think of; they have a star around which they gravitate, an axis around which to revolve. They have something to desire; they can say to themselves, 'If I succeed, if I have that I shall be happy.' They suffer frightful agony, but at death they can at least say, 'I die for him.' Death like that is rebirth. The real, the only irreparably unfortunate are those whose mad embrace clasps the whole universe, those who want everything and nothing, and if an angel or fairy were to descend and suddenly say to them, 'Desire something and you shall have it,' they would remain silent and embarrassed."

"If the fairy were to come," Rosette interposed, "I know what I should ask for."

"You know, Rosette, and in that particular you are happier than I am, for I do not know. In me there are many vague desires which mingle together and produce others, only afterwards to be devoured by them. My desires are like a flock of birds which wheel and hover without an object; your desire is an eagle with its eyes fixed on the sun, and only prevented by a lack of air from rising to it on its outstretched wings. Ah! if I could only know what I desire; if the idea which pursues me only stood out clear and distinct from the mist surrounding it; if the favorable or fatal star appeared in my heaven; if the ray of light I ought to follow shone through the night, whether perfidious will-o'-the-wisp or hospitable beacon; if my pillar of fire preceded me across the desert without manna or springs of water; would that I only knew where I was going, even were the end to be a precipice. To live like this is an occupation like that of those horses which, with blindfolded eyes, turn the wheel of a shaft and travel thousands of miles without seeing anything or changing position. I have turned for a long time, and the cage ought soon to be at the top."

"There are many points of resemblance between you and Albert, and when you speak it sometimes seems to me that he is speaking. I am quite sure that when you know him better you will become great friends; you cannot fail to suit one another. He is tormented, just as you are, with these endless impulses; he loves immensely, without knowing what; he would like to soar up into the sky, for the earth appears to him hardly a footstool for one of his feet, and he has more pride than Lucifer before his fall."

"I at first feared," Theodore replied, "that he was one of those poets, and there are so many of them, who have driven poetry from the earth, one of those who string together false pearls, and when they have rhymed a few simple words conscientiously cross their arms and legs, and allow the spheres to complete their revolution."

"He is not one of that sort. His verses are beneath him, and do not contain him. From his efforts quite a false idea of his personality would be gathered; his real poem is himself, and I do not know whether he will ever write another. He has, deep down in his soul, a seraglio of beautiful ideas, which he surrounds with a triple wall, and he is more jealous of them than ever a Sultan was of his odalisques. He only puts into his verses the ideas he does not care for, or with which he is disheartened, and it is the door from which he expels them, and the world only has what he no longer requires."

"I understand such jealousy and shame. In the same way many persons do not appreciate the love they have had till they have lost it, and their mistresses till they are dead."

"I love those silent people who carry their ideas to their grave and will not leave them to the dirty kisses and the shameless contacts of the crowd. Those lovers please me who do not write their mistresses' name, who do not entrust it to any echo, and who, while sleeping, are pursued by the fear that a dream will make them pronounce it. I am of a similar nature; I have never uttered my thoughts, and none shall know my love. But it is nearly eleven, my dear Theodore, and I am keeping you from a rest of which you must be sadly in need. When I have to leave you I always experience a sinking at my heart, and it seems to me that it will be the last time I shall see you. I put it off as long as possible; but the end must come at last. Some, good-by, for I am afraid Albert will be looking for me. Good-by, dear friend."

Theodore put his arm around her

waist, and accompanied her to the door like that; there he stopped, and for a while looked after her. The corridor was pierced here and there by little square windows, now illuminated by the moon, thus producing alternate patches of light and shadow, fantastic in appearance. At each window Rosette's white and pure form gleamed like a silver phantom; then it disappeared, to appear even more brilliant a little further on; at last she entirely disappeared.

Theodore, buried in profound thought, remained motionless for a few moments with his arms folded, then he passed his hand across his brow, and throwing back his hair by a movement of the head, returned to the bedroom, and after kissing the forehead of the page, who was still asleep, he retired to rest.

CHAPTER VII

ARTIFICES

As soon as it was daylight d'Albert paid Rosette a visit with an eagerness quite unusual as far as he was concerned.

"Well, you have come as early," Rosette said, "as possible; so as a recompense for your gallantry I will give you my hand to kiss."

She drew from beneath the lace-trimmed bed-clothes the prettiest little hand ever seen at the end of a round, plump arm.

D'Albert kissed it with compunction. "And the other one, her little sister, shall I not kiss her too?"

"Oh, yes; nothing is more permissible. I am in my Sunday humor; here." She took her other hand out of bed, and lightly tapped him on the mouth with it. "Am I not the most obliging woman in the world?"

"You are grace personified, and you ought to have white marble temples erected in your honor amid groves of myrtle. Really, I am very much afraid what happened to Psyche will happen to us, and Venus will become jealous of you," d'Albert said, as he joined the two beautiful hands and raised them to his lips.

"How you retail all that in a single breath! It seems to be a phrase you have learned by heart," Rosette said, with a delicious little pout.

"No, you are quite worthy of having phrases turned expressly in your honor, and you are made to cull the first fruits of poesy," d'Albert replied.

"Oh, yes, decidedly; but who has spurred you on to-day? Is it because you are ill that you are so gallant? I am afraid you are going to die. Do you know that when a person suddenly changes his character without apparent reason it is a very bad sign? Now it is proved, in the eyes of all the women who have taken the trouble to love you, that you are usually somewhat sulky, and it is none the less certain that you could not possibly be more charming at this moment, and your amiability is quite inexplicable. But really you are very pale, poor d'Albert; give me your arm, so that I can feel your pulse"; and she lifted his sleeve and counted the pulsations with comic gravity. "No, you are quite well, and you have not the slightest symptoms of fever. Then I must be furiously pretty this morning! Come, give me my mirror, so that I may see how you are right or wrong."

D'Albert picked up a little mirror

from the dressing-table and placed it on the bed.

"Really," Rosette said, "you are not quite wrong. Why do you not write a sonnet to my eyes, Sir Poet? You ought to do so. How unfortunate I am! To have eyes like mine and a poet like yourself, and yet to be without sonnets, just as if I were blind and had a porter for my lover! You do not love me, sir, you have not even composed an acrostic sonnet. And what do you think of my mouth? Still, I have kissed you with this mouth, and may do so again; and, really, it is a favor you scarcely deserve (this does not apply to to-day, for to-day you are worthy of anything); but, to change the subject from myself, this morning your beauty and freshness is unequaled, you are like a brother of Aurora and although it is hardly daylight, you are dressed as if you are going to a ball. Perchance you have designs upon me, or upon my virtue? Would you like to make a conquest of me? But I forget, that is all over and ancient history."

"Rosette, don't joke like that; you know very well that I love you."

"Ah, that depends. I am not so sure; and you?"

"Most perfectly, and so much so that, if you were good enough to close your door against me, I should try to prove it to you, and, I venture to flatter myself, in an unmistakable fashion."

"No; however much I should like to be convinced, my door will remain open; I am too pretty to hide myself; the sun shines for the whole world, and to-day my beauty will, if you please, take the place of the sun."

"In reality, I am not at all pleased; but act as if I were. I am your most humble slave, and I lay my will at your feet."

"That could not be improved; remain of the same mind and this evening leave the key in your room door."

"The Chevalier Theodore de Sérannes," announced the large head of a smiling and fat-faced negro as it appeared in the doorway, "begs to be allowed to pay his respects to you, and prays that you may deign to receive him."

"Show in the Chevalier," said Rosette, as she replaced the bed-clothes right up to her chin.

Theodore first turned towards Rosette's bed, and made her a very deep and graceful bow, which she acknowledged with a friendly nod, and afterwards turned to d'Albert, whom he greeted in a genial and courteous fashion. "Where were you?" Theodore asked. "Perhaps I interrupted an interesting conversation; please resume, and in a few words put me *'au fait.'*"

"Oh no!" Rosette answered, with a malicious smile. "We were talking business."

Theodore sat down at the foot of Rosette's bed, for d'Albert had taken his place near the head by virtue of being the first comer; the conversation for some time flitted from one subject to another in a very clever, gay, and lively fashion, and for that reason, it shall not be reproduced; besides, I am afraid it would lose too much through transcription. The air, tone, and fire of the words and gestures, the thousand and one fashions of pronouncing a word, and all their cleverness, like the sparkle of champagne which fizzes and evaporates at once, are things it is impossible to fix and reproduce. It is a hiatus we leave the reader to fill, and he will assuredly acquit himself better than we should; so let the reader here imagine five or six pages full of the finest, most capricious, most curiously fantastic, most elegant and sparkling conversation.

We know very well that we are here making use of an artifice which, in some respects, recalls that of Timanthes, who, despairing of being able to reproduce the face of Agamemnon, threw a drapery over the head; we prefer to be timid rather than imprudent.

It would not perhaps be out of place to inquire into the motives which caused d'Albert's early rising, and find out what motive had driven him to visit Rosette as early as if he had still loved her. In appearance, it was a little display of unconfessed jealousy. Certainly he was not very fond of Rosette, and he would have parted from her, but at least he desired the rupture to come from him, and not from her, for in the latter case a man's pride is always deeply wounded, however dead his love may be. Theodore was such a ladies' man that it was difficult to see him appear in the course of a liaison without fearing that (and it had already happened many times) all eyes would turn in his direction, and hearts would follow the eyes; and, strange to say, although he had appropriated many women, no lover had felt that long-standing resentment against him which is usually the experience of the supplanter. He had, in all his moods, such an invincible charm, such a natural grace, something so gentle and proud that even men were sensible to its influence. D'Albert, who had visited Rosette with the desire to speak very sharply to Theodore if he met him, was very surprised at not experiencing in his presence any feeling of anger, and at replying with so much facility to the advances made by him. After half an hour you would have said they were two old school chums, and yet d'Albert was inwardly convinced that if Rosette were ever to love this would be the man, and that he would have good grounds for jealousy in the future at least, though for the present he had as yet no suspicion; what would he have thought if he had seen the beauty in her white wrapper glide like a moth upon a moonbeam into the handsome young man's room, and not emerge till three or four hours later, and then with mysterious precautions? He would perhaps have considered himself more unhappy than he really was, for it does not often happen that a pretty and amorous woman leaves a gentleman's room just as pretty as she entered it.

Rosette listened to Theodore most attentively, as a woman sometimes listens to her lover; but his conversation was so amusing and varied that her attention was quite natural, and quite easily comprehensible. So d'Albert did not take umbrage. Theodore's tone to Rosette was polite and friendly, but nothing more.

"What shall we do to-day, Theodore?" Rosette said; "shall we go out in a boat?—will that suit you? Or shall we go hunting?"

"Let us go out hunting, that is less melancholy than gliding upon the water side by side with a bored swan, and parting the water-lily leaves right and left; don't you think so, d'Albert?"

"I would, perhaps, just as soon drift with the stream in a boat as gallop madly in pursuit of a poor animal; but where you go I will follow; it is now only a question of allowing Madame Rosette to get up and don a suitable costume." Rosette made a sign of assent, and rang the bell for her maid to come and dress her. The two young fellows went off arm in arm, and it was not easy to guess, seeing them such good friends, that one was the lover and the other the sweetheart of the same person.

Every one was soon ready. D'Albert and Theodore were already mounted in the courtyard, when Rosette, in her riding-habit, appeared on the steps. She had a lively and resolute manner which suited her admirably. She jumped into the saddle with her usual nimbleness and gave her horse a cut with her riding whip which sent him off like an arrow. D'Albert with a touch of the spur soon joined her, while Theodore allowed them to get a short distance ahead of him, being sure of overtaking them when he pleased. He seemed to expect something, and often turned round in the direction of the château.

"Theodore! Theodore! Come along! Are you riding a wooden horse?" Rosette called out to him.

Theodore put his horse into a gallop, and decreased the distance which separated him from Rosette, without quite overtaking her.

He again looked towards the château, which was now almost out of sight; a little cloud of dust, in which something not yet visible was moving very quickly, appeared at the end of the road. In a few minutes the cloud of dust was by Theodore's side, and out of it emerged the fresh and rosy face of the mysterious page.

"Theodore, come along!" Rosette called out a second time. "Spur your tortoise and rejoin us."

Theodore gave the horse his head, and in a few seconds he had passed d'Albert and Rosette.

"He who loves me follows me," said Theodore, as he jumped a gate four feet high. "Ah well! Sir Poet," he said, when he had landed on the other side, "do you not jump? Yet your steed is winged, so it is said."

"Well, I prefer to go round; I have only one head to break, after all; if I had several I would try," d'Albert replied, with a smile.

"Nobody loves me as nobody follows me," Theodore said, dropping more than usual the curved corners of his mouth. The little page fixed his large blue eyes on him with a look of reproach and dug his heels into his horse's sides.

The horse gave a tremendous leap.

"Yes, some one does," he said from the other side of the gate.

Rosette cast a strange glance at the child and blushed up to her eyes; then, giving her mare a sharp cut, she jumped over the wooden barrier which crossed the ride.

"Do you think, Theodore, that I don't love you as well?"

The child cast a sidelong glance at her from under his eyelashes and drew near Theodore.

D'Albert was already half-way along the ride and saw nothing of this; for from time immemorial fathers, husbands, and lovers have had the privilege of being blind.

"Isnabel," Theodore said, "you are a fool, and you, Rosette, as well! Isnabel, you did not take room enough to jump, and you, Rosette, only just missed catching your dress in the post. You might have killed yourself."

"What does it matter?" Rosette answered in a voice so sad and melancholy that Isnabel forgave her for jumping the barrier.

They proceeded some distance further, and reached the clearing where the meet was to take place. Six rides, cut through the depths of the forest, met at a signpost a little stone tower. The trees were so tall that they seemed to wish to touch the fleecy clouds which a moderate breeze was speeding over their tops, while the long grass and thick bushes provided cover for the game, and sport promised to be good. It was a real old-world forest, with oaks of more than a hundred years old, such as we never see in these days when trees are no longer planted and people have not the patience to wait for those already planted to grow; it was an hereditary forest, planted by the great-grandfathers for the fathers, by the fathers for the grandsons, with avenues of prodigious width, an obelisk, surmounted by a head, a rockwork fountain, the usual lake, and the powdered gamekeepers in yellow leather breeches and sky-blue coats. A multitude of dogs' tails, like bill-hooks, waved hither and thither in a cloud of dust. The signal was given, the straining dogs were uncoupled, and the sport commenced. We shall not describe with exactness the stag's course through the forest; we do not even know if it was a full-grown stag or not, and our inquiries have not satisfied us on that point, painful though it is to have to admit it. Yet we think that in a forest so ancient, shady, and princely there ought only to be full-grown stags, and we do not see why the one after which galloped upon different-colored horses the four principal characters of this story should not be one too.

The stag traveled like a champion, and the fifty dogs he had at his heels were no slight spur to his natural speed. The run was so sharp that the dogs only gave tongue occasionally.

Theodore, being the best mounted and the most accomplished horseman, with wonderful dash kept at the heels of the pack. D'Albert was close behind. Rosette and the little page Isnabel followed, separated from the others by an ever-increasing gap.

The gap was soon so large that it was quite hopeless for them to recover the lost ground.

"Suppose we stop for a little while to give the horses a breather. The chase is going in the direction of the lake, and I know a crosspath by which we can get there as soon as the others."

Isnabel on her little mountain pony drew rein, and her mount dropped his head and began to scatter the sand with his hoofs.

The pony formed the most perfect contrast possible to Rosette's mare; he was black as night, while the mare was of the whiteness of satin. He was shaggy and unkempt, while the mare had her mane plaited with blue ribbon and her tail combed and tied up. One was like a unicorn, the other a poodle.

The same contrast was noticeable between the riders as between their steeds. Rosette's hair was as black as Isnabel's was fair; her eyelashes were very clearly and distinctly marked; the page's were scarcely discernible from the skin, and were very much like the bloom upon the peach. The color of one was strong and solid like the light at midday, while the tints of the other contained the transparencies and shades of early dawn.

"Shall we now try and fall in with the hunt?" Isnabel asked Rosette; "the horses have got their wind."

"Come along then!" the pretty Amazon replied, as she set off at a gallop along the narrow crosspath leading to the lake; the two horses, side by side, took up almost the entire width of the ride.

On Isnabel's side a gnarled and knotted tree extended a thick branch like an arm and seemed to be shaking its fist at the riders. The child did not see it. "Take care," Rosette cried; "stoop low in your saddle or you will be off."

The warning was too late; the bough struck Isnabel in the middle of the body. The violence of the contact caused him to lose his stirrups, and as his pony continued its gallop and the branch was too strong to break, he was lifted out of the saddle and fell heavily to the ground.

The child lost consciousness. Rosette, greatly frightened, jumped from her horse and hastened to the page, who gave no sign of life.

His cap had fallen off and his beautiful fair hair was spread upon the sand. His little open hands were like wax, so pale were they. Rosette knelt by his side and tried to restore him. She had neither flask nor smelling salts with her, and was greatly distressed. At last she saw a deep rut in which the rain water had collected, she dipped her fingers in it, to the great terror of a little frog, the naïad of this pool, and shook a few drops upon the young page's temples. He did not seem to feel it, and the drops of water trickled down his white cheeks like the tears of a sylph upon a lily leaf. Rosette, thinking that his clothes were too tight, undid his belt and unbuttoned his jersey so that his chest might have freer play. Rosette then saw something which to a man would have been one of the most agreeable surprises in the world, but which did not seem to afford her much pleasure, for her brows contracted and her upper lip trembled slightly. She saw a very white throat, still unformed, but giving the most admirable promise and already very beautiful, and a round, polished, ivory bosom, delightful to see, more delightful to kiss.

"A woman," she said. "A woman! Ah, Theodore!"

Isnabel, for we will call him by that name though it was not his, began to breathe a little and languidly raised his long eyelashes; he was not hurt in any way, simply stunned. He soon recovered and with Rosette's help remounted his pony, which had stopped as soon as it lost its rider.

They were quite close to the lake, where they fell in with the rest of the field. Rosette told Theodore in a few words what had happened. The latter changed color several times during Rosette's story and all the rest of the day rode by the side of Isnabel.

They got back to the château early. The day begun so joyfully had ended in a sorrowful fashion.

Rosette was dreamy, and d'Albert seemed deep in reflection. The reader will soon know the reason.

CHAPTER VIII

THROUGH VEILS

No, my dear Silvo, I have not forgotten you; I am not one of those persons who go through life without ever casting a glance behind; my past follows me, and encroaches upon the present, and almost upon the future. Your friendship is one of the sunny spots which stand out most clearly from the blue horizon of my latter years; in fact, I often turn back to contemplate it with a sentiment of ineffable melancholy.

Oh! what a fine time it was! How angelically pure we were! Our feet hardly touched the earth; we seemed to have wings on our shoulders, our desires carried us away, and the spring breeze made the blond halo of youth quiver around our brows.

Do you remember that little island planted with poplars at the spot where the river forked? To reach it we had to cross a long, narrow plank which bent very much in the middle; a real goats' bridge, in fact, hardly good enough for them; it was delightful. Short, close turf, a yellow path like a girdle to the island's green dress, enclosing it at the waist, and an ever-moving shade of aspens and poplars, were not the least attractive parts of this paradise. There were great pieces of linen which the women spread out to whiten in the dew; they looked like squares of snow; and the little girl, dark and sunburnt, whose big wild eyes shone so brilliantly beneath the locks of her hair, who ran after the goats, threatening them, and waving her osier switch, when they made an attempt to walk upon the linen of which she had charge; do you recollect her? and the saffron-colored butterflies with their unsteady flight, and the kingfisher we so often tried to catch, with its nest in the alder thicket. How limpid and gleaming was the water, showing the golden gravel at the bottom of the stream; what pleasure we found in sitting on the bank and dangling our toes in the stream! The water lilies, with their golden flowers gracefully unfolded, looked like green tresses floating upon the agate back of some nymph in her bath. The sky gazed upon itself in this mirror with azure smiles and the most ravishing pearl-grey transparencies, and at all hours of the day there were turquoises, spangles, whiteness, and waves of inexhaustible variety. How I loved those squadrons of little ducks with emerald necks, which swam ceaselessly from one bank to the other and made a few ripples upon that liquid mirror!

How well fitted we were to be the figures in such a landscape! How we suited that gentle, restful nature and how easily we harmonized with it! Spring was without, youth within, the sun upon the grass, a smile upon the lips, a snow of blossoms upon all the bushes, white illusions spreading in our souls, a blush of shame upon our cheeks and upon the dog-rose, poetry singing in our hearts, hidden birds whistling in the trees, and there was light, cooing, perfume, a thousand confused sounds, a beating heart, the water moving a pebble, a blade of grass of a half-formed thought, a drop of water trickling along a flower, a tear trembling upon an eyelid, a sigh of love, and the rustle of the leaves. What evenings we spent there strolling so near the edge that we often walked with one foot in the water and the other on the bank.

Alas! that did not last long, in my case at least, for when you acquired man's knowledge you kept your childish candor. The germ of corruption in me developed very quickly, and the gangrene ate up all that was pure and holy. The only good thing I had left was my friendship for you.

I am used to hiding nothing from you, neither actions nor thoughts. I have laid bare to you the most secret fibers of my heart; however strange, ridiculous, or eccentric are the movements of my soul, I must describe them to you; but really my experiences of late are so strange that I hardly dare acknowledge them to myself. I told you somewhere that I was afraid that, from seeking the beautiful and making efforts to obtain it, I should in the end reach the impossible or monstrous. I have almost got to that stage. When shall I emerge from all these currents which drift me hither and thither? When will the bridge of my vessel cease to tremble beneath my feet and to be swept away by the waves of all these storms? Where shall I find a harbor in which to drop anchor and an immovable rock out of the waves, where I can dry myself and wring the foam from my hair?

O world, what have you done for me to hate you like this? What has turned me against you? What did I expect of you to retain so much hatred at being deceived? What lofty hope have you brought to naught? What eagle's wings have you clipped? What doors ought you to have opened which remained closed, and which of the two of us has failed the other?

Nothing touches me, nothing moves me; I no longer feel on hearing the story of heroic actions those sublime tremors which formerly used to traverse me from head to foot. All that sort of thing seems to me somewhat foolish. No accent is penetrating enough to bite the distended fibers of my heart and make them vibrate: I watch tears flowing from the eyes of my fellows with the same feeling that I watch the rainfall, unless the water of which they are composed is beautiful, or the light reflects in them in a picturesque way, or they flow down a beautiful cheek. They are but animals for whom I feel a slight remnant of pity. I would allow a peasant or servant to be unmercifully beaten, though I would not stand by and see a horse or dog suffer similar treatment, and yet I am not evil. I have done no harm to any one in the world, nor shall I probably ever do so. I abhor the whole world in mass, and from its numbers I only consider one or two worthy of special hatred. The hatred of a person causes just as great a feeling of anxiety as love; it is the distinction, the isolation of one out of the crowd; it produces a state of violence on his account; it means the thought of him by day, dreams by night. What more does a person do for the one he loves? Would the trouble and precautions taken to destroy an enemy be devoted to a mistress's pleasure? I doubt it, for to really hate some one, it is necessary to love another. A great hate serves as a counterpoise to a great love; and whom should I hate, I who love nothing?

My hatred is like my love, a confused and general sentiment which seeks to cling to something and cannot. I have in me a treasure of hate and of love which I do not know how to use and which weighs upon me horribly. If I do not find a means of bestowing one or the other or both, I shall burst, like a bag too full of money. Oh! if I could only hate some one, if one of the stupid fellows with whom I live could only insult me, so as to make my blood boil in my veins, and arouse me from my mournful somnolence. If the last heart-beat of an enemy writhing beneath my feet could make a delightful tremor run through me, and if the smell of his blood could become more pleasant to my nostrils than the scent of flowers, oh how willingly I would renounce love, and how happy I should consider myself!

I love nothing, I have said. Alas! I am now afraid of loving some one. It would be a thousand times better to hate than to love like that! I have met the type of beauty I have dreamed about for so long. I have discovered the body of my phantom; I have seen and we have spoken; I have shaken hands with my chimera. I knew very well that I could not be mistaken and that my presentiments never lied. Yes, Silvio, I am by the side of my life's dream; my room is here, hers is there. I can see from here the curtain of her window shake and the light of her lamp. Her shadow has just passed across the curtain: in an hour we shall sup together.

The beautiful Turkish eyelids, the limpid and profound glance, the warm color of pale amber, the long and shining black hair, the fine, haughty nose, the small slender hands and feet, the sinuous delicacy, and the oval purity which give so much distinction and such aristocratic appearance to a head, in fact, the whole of my desire is complete; all that I should have been fortunate to find scattered among five or six persons is combined in a single one.

The thing I adore most in the world is a beautiful hand. If you only saw its perfection, its whiteness, the softness of the skin and its penetrating moisture; the far-famed hands of Anne of Austria were rough compared with them. What art and grace there is in the slightest movement of such a hand! The thought of the hand alone makes me quite mad, and causes me to tremble and my lips to burn. I close my eyes to shut out the sight of it; but the ends of its delicate fingers seize my lashes and lift up my eyelids, causing a thousand visions of ivory and snow to pass through my mind.

Ah! without a doubt Satan's claw is covered by such a skin; some jesting demon is playing with me; it is sorcery. The thing is too monstrously impossible.

As for the hand, I am going to travel to Italy to see the works of the great masters, to study, compare, draw, and in fact become a painter in order to be able to reproduce it as it is, as I see it, as I realize it; that will perhaps be a way of getting rid of this sort of obsession.

I desired beauty; I did not know what I asked. It was like a wish to look at the sun without eyes, or to touch a flame. I suffer horribly. To be unable to assimilate such perfection, to be unable to pass into it and absorb it into oneself, to have no way of reproducing it! When I see something beautiful, I should like to touch it with my entire self, everywhere at the same time. I would like to sing its praises, to paint it, to be loved by it as I love it; I should like something which cannot and will never be.

Your letter has pained me very much, forgive me for saying so. All the calm, pure happiness you enjoy, the walks in the reddening woods, the long talks, so tender and confidential, which end in a chaste kiss upon the forehead; the serene detached life; the days so quickly passed that the night seems to advance towards one, make the internal agitation in which I live seem even more tempestuous. So you are to be married in two months; all obstacles are swept away; you are sure now of belonging to one another forever. Your present happiness increases your future felicity. You are happy and you are sure of soon being happier. What a fortunate lot is yours! Your love is beautiful, but it is not the dead and palpable beauty in her you adore, the material beauty; it is the invisible and eternal beauty, the beauty which never grows old, the beauty of the soul. She is full of grace and candor; she loves you in the way such souls know how to love. Oh, Silvio! how rare are the hearts contented with love pure and simple, which neither desire of hermitage in the forest nor a garden on an island of Lake Maggiore.

If I had courage to tear myself away from this spot, I would spend a month with you; perhaps I should become purified in the air you breathe, perhaps the shade of your avenues would restore a little freshness to my burning brow; but it is a paradise in which I must not set foot. Hardly am I permitted to look from a distance over the wall at the two beautiful angels walking there hand in hand, gazing into each other's eyes. The demon can only enter into Eden in the form of a serpent, and my dear Adam, for all the joy of heaven I would not like to be the serpent of your Eve.

What frightful havoc is it which has been wrought in my soul of late? Who has turned my blood and changed it into poison? I wished to love. I was like a madman calling and mocking love; I writhed with rage under the feeling of my own impotence; I fired my blood, I dragged my body to the quagmires of pleasure. I have ferociously pressed against my empty heart a young and beautiful woman who loved me; I have run after passion and it eluded me. I have prostituted myself, and I have been like a virgin who went into a brothel hoping to find a lover among those driven there by debauchery, instead of waiting patiently in discreet silence and shadow till the angel reserved by God for me appeared in a radiant glow, a flower from heaven in his hand. All the years I have lost in childish agitation, in running hither and thither, in wishing to force nature and time, I ought to have passed in solitude and meditation, in trying to render myself worthy of being loved; that would have been a wise course; but I had scales upon my eyes and I walked straight to the precipice. I have already one foot suspended over the abyss, and I think I shall soon lift the other. Resistance is vain, and I feel that I must fall to the bottom of this new abyss which has just opened in front of me.

CHAPTER IX

TO DAYLIGHT

You whom I have loved so much, Silvio, my good, my only comrade, you have never given me any such impression, and yet if under heaven there was any close friendship, if ever two souls, although different, perfectly understood one another, it was our friendship and our two souls. What fleeting hours we passed together! What endless talks we had, and yet they seemed to end too soon. We had in our hearts for each other that window which Momus would have liked to open in man's flank. How proud I was to be your friend, I who am younger than you, yet so mad while you are so reasonable!

But, Silvio, now I love!

My feeling for this young man is really incredible; never has a woman created such an impression on me. The sound of his clear and silvery voice gets upon my nerves and agitates me in a strange fashion; my soul hangs upon his lips, like a bee on a flower, to drink in the honey of his words. I cannot brush against him in passing without trembling from head to foot, and in the evening when we separate, as he holds out his soft and satiny hand, all my life wells towards the spot he has touched, and an hour afterwards I can still feel the pressure of his fingers.

This morning I watched him for a long time without his seeing me. I was concealed behind my curtain. He was at his window, which was precisely opposite mine. This part of the château was built at the end of the reign of Henry IV; it is half brick, half rubble, according to the fashion of the period; the window is long and narrow with a stone lintel and balcony. Theodore, for without a doubt you have guessed it is he, was leaning sadly upon the balcony and appeared to be in a deep reverie. Drapery of red damask with large flowers half raised fell in large folds behind him and served as a background. How good-looking he was, and how his dark, pale head stood out from its background. Two big locks of black, gleaming hair, like bunches of grapes, hung gracefully upon his cheeks and enclosed in charming fashion the fine, regular oval of his beautiful face. His round, plump neck was entirely bare, and he had a sort of large-sleeved dressing gown which was rather like a woman's dress. He held in his hand a yellow tulip which he pitilessly dismembered in his reverie and cast the fragments to the winds.

The sun shone upon him as he stood with the breeze gently moving his long hair, while with his bare, marble-like neck, with his dressing gown fastened at the waist, with his slender hands emerging from the sleeves like a flower's pistils from the midst of the petals, he did not appear to be the best looking of men, but a most beautiful woman, and I said to myself in my heart, "Theodore is a woman!" Then I suddenly recollected a bit of foolishness I wrote to you a long while ago—you remember—concerning my ideal and the way in which I should most certainly meet her: the beautiful lady in the Louis XIII park, the red and white château, the terrace, the avenues of ancient chestnuts, and the conversation at the window; I gave you previously all those details. This is indeed the precise realization of my dream. It was the same style of architecture, the same effect of light and shade, the sort of beauty, the color and character I had desired; there was nothing lacking except the fact that the lady was a man: but I must admit I had then entirely forgotten that circumstance.

Would God put silken lashes so long and dark around a man's eyes? Would He tint with such bright and tender carmine our ugly and hairy mouths? Our bones are not worthy of a covering of such white and delicate flesh; our skulls are not made to be covered with waves of such beautiful hair.

O beauty! we are only created to love and adore you on our bended knees if we find you, or else to seek you forever throughout the world if that happiness is not vouchsafed to us; but to possess you, to be beautiful, that is only possible to angels and women. Lovers, poets, painters, and sculptors, we all seek to raise an altar to you—the lover in his mistress, the poet in his song, the painter in his canvas, the sculptor in his marble but our eternal despair is our inability to make palpable the beauty we perceive, and the fact that we are enveloped in a body which does not realize our ideal.

I have before now seen a young man who has stolen the form which ought to have been mine. The wretch was just as I should have liked to be. He had the beauty of my ugliness, and by his side I was like a rough copy of him. He was of my height, but stronger and more slender than I; his appearance resembled mine, but with an elegance and nobility I lacked. His eyes were of the same color as mine, but they had a look and brilliancy mine will never possess. His nose had been cast in the same mold as mine, only his seemed to have been finished by the chisel of a skillful sculptor; the nostrils were more open and passionate. There was something heroic in him which is entirely lacking in me; it was just as if I had tried to make a perfected model of myself. I seemed to be the rough copy of a thought of which he was the fair copy. When I saw him walk, stop, greet the ladies, and sit down with a perfect grace, the result of the beauty of his proportions, I was filled with sadness and frightful jealousy, such as must be felt by the clay cast which dries and cracks in a dark corner of the studio, while the noble marble statue, which without it would not exist, stands proudly upon its carved pedestal and attracts the attention and eulogy of visitors. Now this fellow was merely myself a little more successfully cast in less wayward bronze which had run with more exactness into all the crevices of the mold. I considered him very bold to strut about with my form and put on airs as if he were an original type: after all, he was only my copy, for I was born before him, and without me Nature would not have conceived the idea of making him as he was. When the women praised his good looks and the agreeableness of his person, I had the greatest desire to get up and say, "How foolish you are; praise me at once, for this gentleman is myself, and it is a useless dodge to give him what really belongs to me." This young man besides was stupid, still he was more successful on that account. But sometimes I envied his stupidity more than his good looks. Now although Theodore is very handsome, I have no desire for his beauty; I prefer it to belong to him rather than to me.

I am a man of Homeric times; the world in which I live is not mine, and I do not understand the society which surrounds me. I am as pagan as Alcibiades and Phidias. I find earth as beautiful as heaven, and I consider that correctness of form is virtue. Spirituality is not my share; I prefer a statue to a phantom, and the midday sunlight to the dawn. Three things please me: gold, marble, and purple—brilliance, solidity, and color. My dreams are made of them, and all the palaces I build in my mind are constructed of these materials. Sometimes I have other dreams; visions of long cavalcades of white horses, without bridles and trappings, ridden by handsome youths quite naked, defiling upon a blue ground, or of bands of young girls crowned with fillets, wearing tunics with straight folds and carrying ivory fans who seem to circle around an immense vase. Never is there any fog or vapor in them, never anything uncertain or floating. My heaven has no clouds, or if so they are solid hewn clouds made of the fragments of marble fallen from the statue of Jupiter. Mountains with high peaks indent its edges, and the sun, resting upon one of the loftiest heights, opens wide a yellow eye with its gilded lion-like pupils. The grasshopper creaks, the ears of corn rustle; the shade, overwhelmed and unable to withstand the heat, contracts and is concentrated at the foot of the trees; everything is shining, gleaming, and sunlit. The smallest detail assumes distinctness and is boldly accentuated; each object puts on a robust form. That world is mine. The streams of my landscapes fall in the waves of a carved urn; between the great reeds can be seen gleaming the round silvery thigh of some naïad with glaucous hair. In the dark oak forest is to be found Diana wearing her interlaced buskins, with her case of arrows upon her back and her loosened sling. She is followed by her pack of hounds and her nymphs with harmonious names. My pictures are painted in four colors, like those of the primitive painters, and often they are only colored bas-reliefs, for I love to touch with my finger what I see, and pursue the curving contours to their most secret folds. I have looked upon love in the light of the ancients and as a bit of more or less perfect sculpture. How is the arm? Well enough. The arms do not lack delicacy. What do you think of this foot? I think that the ankle has no nobility about it, and the heel is common. But the throat is well placed and of good shape, the line of the figure is waving enough, the shoulders are fat and of beautiful character. This woman would be a passable model and it would be possible to sketch several parts from her. Let us love her.

I have always been like that. I have for women a sculptor's eye rather than a lover's. I have all my life been critical of the shape of the flagon rather than of the quality of its contents. If I were to have the box of Pandora in my hands I think I should not open it.

I look upon woman according to the ancient manner as a beautiful slave destined for our pleasures. Christianity has not rehabilitated her in my eyes. She is to me always something unlike and inferior to myself, something to be adored and enjoyed, a plaything more intelligent than if it were of ivory or gold, with the power of getting up without assistance if dropped upon the ground. I have been told, on that account, that I thought ill of women; on the contrary, I consider that I think very well of them.

I really do not know why women have such a desire to be considered men. I can imagine a person desiring to be a serpent, lion, or an elephant; but it passes my comprehension how any one can desire to be a man.

I have in my life written a few amorous verses, or at least stanzas which pretended to be such. I have just re-read some of them. The sentiment of modern love is entirely absent from them. If they were written in Latin distiches instead of French rhyme they might be mistaken for the work of a bad poet of the days of Augustus. I am surprised that the women to whom they were written, instead of being charmed with them, were not seriously angered. It is quite true that women no more understand poetry than do the flowers or vegetables, and is quite natural and explicable, seeing that they themselves are poetry, or at least its best instruments; the flute neither hears nor understands the air played upon it.

In these verses nothing but the gold or ebony of the hair, the miraculous fineness of the skin, the roundness of the arms, the little feet, and the delicate shape of the hand is mentioned, and they all end in a humble supplication to the divinity to grant as quickly as possible the enjoyment of all these beautiful things. In the passages of triumph there are only garlands hung at the threshold, a rain of flowers, burning perfumes, kisses, white and charming nights, quarrels with the dawn, with injunctions to the dawn to return to its hiding place behind the saffron curtains of old Pithonus; it is an explosion without heat, a sonority without vibration. The lines are exact and polished, but through all their refinement and veils of expression can be heard the sharp, hard voice of the master which he tries to soften when speaking to his slave. It is not a soul asking another soul to love because it loves; it is not an azure and smiling lake inviting a stream to vanish into its bosom, so that together they may reflect the stars in the sky; it is not a couple of doves opening their wings at the same time to fly to the same nest.

"Cinthia, you are beautiful; hasten. Who knows if you will live till to-morrow? Your locks are darker than the glossy skin of an Ethiopian virgin. Hasten; a few years hence silver threads will appear in those thick tresses. These roses smell sweetly to-day; to-morrow they will have the odor of death and will only be the corpses of flowers. Let us breathe your roses, for they are so like your cheeks; let us kiss your cheeks, for they are so like your roses. When you are old, Cinthia, no one will desire you, not even the lictor's servants when you pay them, and you will run after me whom you now repulse. Wait till Saturn has ruled with his nail that pure and shining brow, and you will see how your threshold, now so besieged and sprinkled with tears and flowers, will be shunned, cursed, and overgrown with grass and briars. Hasten, Cinthia; the tiniest wrinkle may serve as the grave of the greatest passion."

It is in this brutal and imperious formula that the ancient elegy is summed up; it always returns to that;

it is its greatest and strongest reason, and the Achilles of its arguments. After that there is little more to be said, and when a robe and a necklace of well-matched pearls have been promised, a man is at his wits' end. That, too, is what I find most conclusive in similar circumstances. I do not, however, always strictly adhere to this program, and I embroider my meager canvas here and there with a few threads of different colored silks. But these bits are short or else knotted twenty times and badly fastened. I talk elegantly enough about love because I have read many beautiful essays on the subject. That does not require the actor's talent. With many women the appearance suffices. The habit of writing and imagining guarantees that I do not stop short in these matters, and any mind with a little application will easily obtain the same result; but I do not feel a word of what I say, and I repeat in low tones like the ancient poet, "Cinthia, hasten."

I have often been charged with being crafty and deceitful. No one in the world would like as well to speak freely and empty his heart. But as I have not one idea or sentiment like those of the people who surround me, as at the first true word I let fall there would be an hurrah and a general outcry, I have preferred silence, or if I speak, to only repeat the commonplaces I have heard. I should soon be in the ladies' bad graces were I to tell them what I have just written to you. I do not think they would appreciate my way of looking at and viewing love. As to the men, the best I can say for them is that they ought to walk on all fours, and I can hardly tell them that; I have no desire to cause a quarrel with every word I utter. It does not matter what I think or what I do not think; whether I am sad when I seem to be gay, or joyful when I seem to be melancholy. I am not blamed because I do not go about naked. Can I not dress my face as I do my body? Why should a mask seem more reprehensible than clothes, and a lie than a corset?

Alas! the earth turns round the sun roasted on one side and frozen on the other. A battle is fought in which 600,000 men hack one another to pieces. Still the weather is beautiful and the flowers display unparalleled coquetry, for they boldly open their luxuriant blossoms even under the horses' hoofs. To-day a fabulous number of good actions have been performed; yet it pours with rain, snows and thunders, with lightning and hail; it seems as if the end of the world is approaching. The benefactors of humanity have mud up to their waists, and are splashed like dogs unless they have a carriage. Creation mocks pitilessly at the creature and fires off at him deadly sarcasms every minute. Every one is indifferent to every one else, and each thing lives or vegetates by its own love. What does it matter to the sun, the beet roots, or even to men whether I do this or not, whether I live or die, whether I suffer or enjoy, whether I dissimulate or am quite open? A bit of straw falls upon an ant and breaks the third leg at the second articulation; a rock falls upon a village and crushes it. I do not think one of these accidents draws more tears than the other from the golden eyes of the stars. You are my best friend, if that phrase is not as hollow as a bell. But is there one of my friends or mistresses who will remember my name twenty years hence, and will recognize me in the street if I meet them and am out at elbow? Oblivion and nothingness, that is man in his entirety.

I feel that I am as perfectly alone as it is possible to be, and all the threads connecting me with other persons and objects have been broken one by one. There are few instances of a man who, having preserved a knowledge of the movements taking place in himself, has reached such a state of brutishness. I am like one of those flasks of liquors, left standing up, from which in consequence the strength has completely evaporated. The liquid has the same color and appearance, but taste it and you will find it as insipid as water.

When I think of it, I am terrified at the rapidity of this decomposition; if it continues I shall have to be salted, or else I shall inevitably rot, and the worms will attack me when I have lost my soul, for that comprises the only difference between a body and a corpse. A year ago, not more, I had still something human about me; I bestirred myself, I sought. I had one thought more cherished than all the others, a sort of aim, an ideal: I wished to be loved, I dreamed the dreams customary at that age, less vaporous and chaste, it is true, than those of an ordinary young fellow, but still confined within reasonable bounds. Little by little the incorporeal was detached and dissipated, and there only remained in me a deep bed of thick slime. The dream became a nightmare, and the chimera a succubus; the world of the soul has shut its ivory gates in my face. I only realize now what I touch with my hands; I have dreams of stone; everything is condensed and solidified around me; nothing floats or wavers; there is no air, no breath; matter oppresses, overwhelms, and crushes me. I am like a pilgrim who one summer's day fell asleep with his feet in the river and awoke in the winter to find them encased in the ice. I no longer desire the love or friendship of any one; even glory, that brilliant halo I used to so much desire for my brow, has ceased to give me the least longing.

I picture to myself supreme happiness like this. It is a great square building without windows on the outside; a great courtyard surrounded by a colonnade of white marble, having a crystal fountain in the center with a quicksilver stream after the Arabian fashion, and groves of orange trees and pomegranates, placed alternately, stands beneath the bluest of blue sky in the very yellow sunlight; big grey hounds with pointed noses sleep here and there; from time to time negroes with bare feet and golden circlets about their legs, and beautiful servants white and slender, dressed in rich and fanciful attire, pass between the arches with baskets on their arms or pitchers on their heads. I am reclining motionless and silent beneath a magnificent dais surrounded by piles of cushions, with a great tame lion at my elbow, and the bare throat of a young slave under my foot as a footstool as I smoke opium from a great jade pipe.

"You see what my Eldorado, my promised land, is like; it is a dream, like everything else, but it has this speciality about it, that I never introduce a familiar figure into it; no one of my friends has ever crossed the threshold of this palace of the imagination; no woman I have ever loved has sat by my side upon its velvet cushions; I am there alone in the midst of shadows. All the women's faces, all the graceful shadows of young girls with which I people it I have never had any thought of loving; I have never supposed them to be in love with me. In this fantastic seraglio I have created no favorite sultana. There are negresses, mulattoes, Jewesses with blue skins and red hair, Greeks and Circassians, Spaniards and English women; but they are only to me symbols of color and line, and I have them just as a man keeps all sorts of wine in his cellar and all sorts of humming birds in his aviary. They are pleasure machines, pictures which need no frame, statues which come if they are called when the fancy takes their master to look at them from close quarters. A woman has over a statue this incomparable advantage: she turns of her own accord in the desired direction, instead of, as in the case of the statue, having to be turned and placed by oneself at the right angle; that is fatiguing. . . .

I see Theodore, I listen to him talking or singing, for he sings admirably, and I take an unutterable pleasure in so doing. He has the effect of a woman so strongly upon me that one day in the heat of conversation I called him "Madam," making him laugh by so doing, though his laugh seemed to me somewhat forced.

If he is a woman, what can his motive be for disguising himself in this way? I cannot offer any explanation of it. For a young, handsome, and beardless youth to disguise himself as a woman is conceivable; it opens a thousand doors which would otherwise remain closed, and may lead him into a complication of adventures quite pleasant and amazing. In that way a closely guarded woman can be reached, and the result of her surprise may be the man's happiness. But I do not know what advantage there can be in a beautiful woman going about the country dressed as a man. She can only ruin herself by it. A woman must in this way renounce the pleasure of being courted, serenaded, and adored; she would rather forfeit her life than that, and she is right, for what is a woman's life without it? Nothing, or something worse than death. I am always surprised that women of thirty or those who are pitted by smallpox do not jump from the top of a tower. In spite of it all something stronger than argument cries out to me that Theodore is a woman. Yet if my presentiment has deceived me; if Theodore is really a man, as the world believes him to be! Marvelous beauty such as he possesses is sometimes seen. Youth lends itself to this illusion. Even if I were to find out with certainty that Theodore is not a woman, alas, I do not know whether I should not love him still.

Chapter X

ADVENTURES

My beautiful friend, you were quite right to try and dissuade me from the project I conceived of seeing men, and studying them thoroughly, before giving my heart to any one of them. I have had all love extinguished in me, and even all possibility of love.

Poor young girls that we are; brought up with such care, so chastely surrounded by a triple wall of precautions and reticences, allowed to hear and suspect nothing, while our principal accomplishment is to know nothing, in what strange errors do we live, and what curious visions take us in their arms!

Ah! Graciosa, thrice cursed be the minute when the idea of this disguise came to me; what horrors, infamy, and vulgarity I have been forced to witness or hear! What a treasure of chaste and precious ignorance I have dissipated in so short a time!

It was a beautiful moonlight night, do you remember? We were walking together at the end of the garden, in that mournful and little-frequented avenue with a statue of a fawn playing the flute at one end (the statue had lost its nose and was covered with thick dark moss), and at the other an artificial view painted on the wall, which had been half effaced by the rain. Through the thin foliage of the grove the stars were visible. A smell of young shoots and fresh plants came to us from the flower beds on the wings of a slight breeze; a bird from his hiding place whistled a strange and languorous song. We, as young girls always do, talked of love, suitors, marriage, and of the fine gentlemen we had seen at Mass; we put together the few notions of the world we possessed; we turned over in a hundred different ways a phrase we had overheard, the meaning of which was not clear to us; we asked one another the thousand absurd questions which perfect innocence alone could imagine. How primitive was the poetry, how adorable the foolishness we two little schoolgirls exchanged!

You desired as a lover a brave and proud young man with black hair and mustache, large spurs, great feathers, and a mighty sword, in fact a sort of amorous bully, and you surrendered to the heroic and triumphant. You only dreamt of duels, escalades, and miraculous devotion, and you would gladly have cast your glove into the lion's den, so that your Spaniard might recover it for you. It was very comic to see a little girl as you then were, blonde, blushing and starting at the slightest sound, uttering such generous tirades in a breath with the most martial air in the world.

Though I was but six months older than you, I was six years less romantic. One thing caused me the greatest anxiety, and that was to find out what men said to one another and what they did when they left drawing rooms and theaters. I foresaw in their life many defective and obscure sides, carefully veiled from our eyes, which it was very important for us to find out. Sometimes, hidden behind a curtain, I spied from a distance upon the gentlemen who came to the house, and there then seemed to be something ignoble and cynical mixed with their attractiveness, a gross recklessness or preoccupation which I did not find in them when they entered, and which they seemed to discard as if by enchantment on the threshold of the room. Every one, young as well as old, appeared to me to have uniformly adopted the mask of convention, sentiments of convention, and conventional conversation, when they were in the presence of women. From the corner of the drawing-room where I sat up straight without leaning back on my seat, twisting my bouquet in my fingers, I listened and watched; my eyes were lowered, but still I saw all that was going on to the right and left of me, before and behind me; like the fabulous eyes of the lynx mine pierced walls, and I could have told all that was taking place in the next room.

I also noticed a remarkable difference in the way in which the married women were treated; discreet and polite phrases, like those addressed to myself and my companions, were not used, but a more familiar humor was employed, manners less sedate and more loose were in vogue, while the obvious reticences and the brief subterfuges of a corruption which knows that it has a like corruption, opposed to it were in evidence. I realized that between them there was a common element which did not exist between us, and I would have given all I possessed to know what that element was.

With what anxiety and curious fury did I follow with eye and ear the chattering and laughing groups of young people, and the couples who exchanged ambiguous glances as they strolled about. Incredulous sneers were on their disdainful lips; they seemed to be laughing at what they had just said, and to be retracting the compliments and adulation they had just bestowed upon us. I did not hear their words; but I understood by the movement of their lips that they were pronouncing words in a tongue unknown to me, and one which had never been used in my presence. Even those who had the most modest and humble air raised their heads with a quite visible air of revolt and boredom; a sigh of breathlessness like that of an actor who had just come to the end of a long speech unwittingly escaped them, and when they left us they made a half turn on the heel in a quick and hurried fashion which betokened internal satisfaction at being delivered from their onerous duty of being honorable and gallant.

I would have given a year of my life to have heard, without being seen, an hour of their conversation. Often I gathered from certain attitudes, gestures and oblique glances that I myself was under discussion, either as regards my age or my appearance. Then I was upon tenter hooks; the few indistinct words, the few scraps of a phrase which reached me at intervals roused my curiosity to its highest pitch without power to satisfy it, and I was involved in strange doubts and perplexities.

Very often the remarks seemed to be complimentary, and that was not what disturbed me. I cared little enough whether I was considered beautiful, but the observations whispered in the ear, and almost always followed by long titters and winks, were what I should have liked to overhear, and for one of those phrases uttered in an undertone, behind a curtain or in a doorway, I would have sacrificed without regret the most flowery and perfumed conversation.

If I had had a lover, I should have delighted in knowing how he spoke of me to other men, and in what terms he boasted of his good fortune to his boon companions, with a little wine in his head and his elbows upon the tablecloth.

Now I know, and the knowledge angers me. It is always thus.

My idea was a mad one, but what is done is done, and I cannot unlearn what is learned. I did not listen to you, my dear Graciosa; I repent it; but one does not always listen to reason, especially when it comes from such a pretty mouth as yours, for I do not know why it is not possible to think advice good unless it proceeds from an old grayhead. Just as if being stupid for sixty years can make a person clever.

But that desire tormented me too much, and I could not contain myself. I burned in my little skin like a chestnut on the stove. The fatal apple hung in the boughs above my head, and in the end I had to bite it, sure of being able to throw it away afterwards if the taste seemed bitter.

I did as the blonde Eve, my very dear grandmother, did, I bit it.

The death of my uncle, my only remaining relative, leaving me free to act as I chose, I put into execution the plan of which I had so long dreamed. My precautions were taken with the greatest care, so that no one should suspect my sex. I had learned to fence and shoot; I rode a horse perfectly, and with a boldness of which few riders were capable; I studied the way to wear the clothes, and in a few months I made of a pretty girl a much finer cavalier, the only thing lacking being the mustache. I realized my property and left the town, determined not to return till I had the fullest experience.

It was the only way of setting at rest my doubts; lovers would have taught me nothing, or at least I should only have received an incomplete insight, and I wished to study man completely, to dissect him fiber by fiber, with an inexorable scalpel, and stretch him alive and palpitating upon my operating table; for that it was necessary to see him alone, at his ease, to follow him in his walks and in his orgies. In my disguise I could go everywhere without being noticed: nothing was hidden from me, all constraint and reserve were put aside in my presence; I received confidences, and made false ones to invite the true. Alas! woman, you have only read man's romance not his history!

It is a frightful thing to think how profoundly ignorant we are of the life and conduct of those who appear to love us and whom we marry. Their real existence is as perfectly unknown to us as if they were the inhabitants of Saturn, or of some other planet a hundred million miles away from our sphere; they seem to be of another species, and there is not the slightest intellectual bond between the two sexes; the virtues of the one make the vices of the other, and that which makes the man admired makes the woman honored.

Our life is clear and can be seen at a glance. It is easy to follow us from the home to the school and from the school to the home; our actions are a mystery to nobody. Our sonatas and romances are executed with the most desirable coldness. We are well and duly fastened to our mother's apron strings, and at nine o'clock, or ten o'clock at the latest, we retire to our little white beds in our clean and retired bedchambers, where we are virtuously locked till the next morning. The most wide-awake and jealous susceptibility would find nothing in that.

The most limpid crystal is not as transparent as such a life.

The man who takes us knows what we have done from the moment we were weaned and even before, if he cares to carry his inquiries so far. Our life is not a life, it is a sort of vegetation, like that of mosses and flowers. The glacial shadow of the maternal trunk over-hangs us poor stifled rosebuds, who dare not open our blossoms. Our principal business is to hold ourselves upright, to be well corseted, keep our eyes discreetly lowered, and to surpass in immobility manikins and spring dolls.

We are forbidden to enter into conversation, other than to reply "yes" or "no," if we are asked. Immediately the talk becomes interesting, we are sent away to practice on our harp or harpsichord, and our music masters are sixty at least and are horribly addicted to tobacco. The models suspended in our chambers are very vague and sketchy in their anatomy.

Through the desire to prevent us becoming romantic, we are turned into idiots. The days of our education are spent not in teaching us anything, but in preventing us from learning.

We are really prisoners in body and mind; but how can the young man with full liberty of action, who goes out one morning and does not return till the next, who has money, and can spend it as he pleases, justify the employment of his time? What man would like to tell his beloved what he has done during the day and the night? Not one, even of those reputed the most pure.

I sent my horse and my clothes to a little farm belonging to me, some way from the town. I dressed myself, mounted, and started, not without a sinking at the heart. I had no regrets, I left nothing behind, neither relations nor friends, not a dog nor cat, and yet I was sad, I almost had tears in my eyes; this farm, which I had only visited five or six times, had nothing about it to make it dear to me, but I turned round two or three times to watch from a distance the bluey smoke rising through the trees.

There, with my dresses and skirts, I had left my claim to womanhood; into the room where I dressed were crowded twenty years of my life which no longer counted nor concerned me. Upon the door might have been written "Here lies Madelaine de Maupin"; for really I was no longer Madelaine de Maupin, but Theodore de Sérannes, and no one would again call me by the sweet name Madelaine.

The drawer which contained my now useless dresses appeared to me like the shroud of my white illusions; I was a man, or at least I appeared to be; the young girl was dead.

When the tops of the chestnut trees which surrounded the farm were out of sight, it seemed to me that I was no longer myself, but some one else, and I remembered my former actions as if they were the acts of a stranger at which I was present, or the beginning of a story the reading of which I had not finished.

I recalled a thousand little details, the childish *naïveté* of which brought a slightly mocking and indulgent smile to my lips like that of a young libertine as he listened to the confidences of a boy in the third form; and at the moment I was forever severing myself, all my childish girlish actions seemed to be running along by the side of the road making a thousand signs of friendship to me and throwing me kisses.

I spurred my horse to rid myself of these enervating emotions; the trees flew rapidly by on my right and left; but I still seemed to hear my name being called from the roadside: "Madelaine! Madelaine!"

I went on my way; in the sound of the breeze I seemed to recognize the last phrase of the sonata I had learned for my uncle's birthday, and as I passed a house I saw, hanging at a window, the phantom of my curtains. All my past seemed to cling to me to prevent me from going forward and reaching a fresh future.

I hesitated two or three times, and I turned my horse's head in the opposite direction.

But curiosity with its insidious words whispered in my ear, "Go on, Theodore; the opportunity for finding out is a good one; if you do not learn to-day you will never know. Then, too, you will give your noble heart to the first comer who appears honorable and passionate. Men conceal extraordinary secrets from us, Theodore!"

I resumed my gallop. The breeches were on my body, not my spirit; I felt uneasiness and a tremor of fear—to give it its correct name—at a dark spot in the forest; a shot from a poacher nearly made me faint. If it had been a thief the pistols in my holsters and my formidable sword would not have been much use. But, bit by bit, I hardened myself, and paid no further attention to my fears.

The sun sunk slowly down below the horizon like the luster of a theater after the performance is over. Hares and pheasants crossed the road from time to time; the shadows lengthened and distant objects were tinted with red. Some parts of the sky were of a very soft and subdued lilac, others were of lemon and orange tints. The night birds began their song, and a number of strange sounds issued from the wood. The little remaining light vanished, and darkness became complete, increased as it was by the shadows of the trees. I, who had never gone out alone at night, was in the midst of a great forest at eight o'clock at night! Imagine it, Graciosa! I, who nearly died of fright at the end of the garden! Fear took possession of me; my heart beat terribly. It was, I must admit, with great satisfaction that I espied the lights of the town I was bound for. As soon as I saw the little points of light like tiny terrestrial stars, my fear completely disappeared. It seemed to me that the lights were the eyes of so many friends watching for me.

My horse was no less pleased than I was, and scenting to him the most agreeable smell of a stable, he went straight to the hotel Lion Rouge.

A light shone through the inn windows. I left my horse in charge of an ostler and went into the inn kitchen.

An enormous fireplace opened at the back its red and black jaws, which swallowed a fagot at each mouthful, and on each side of the firedogs, two dogs, as big as men, sat with the greatest unconcern, only raising their paws a little and uttering a sort of sigh when the heat became too intense; most certainly they would rather have been burnt to a cinder than retire a step.

My arrival did not seem to please them, and it was in vain that, in order to become acquainted, I patted them several times; they looked at me in a way which boded no good. That astonished me, for animals usually come to me of their own accord.

The inkeeper came to inquire what I would have for supper.

He was a big-bellied man with a red

nose, a wall eye, and an expansive smile. At each word he uttered he displayed a double row of pointed teeth, far apart like an ogre's. The big kitchen knife which hung by his side gave him a doubtful appearance, and seemed to be able to be used for several purposes. When I told him what I wanted he gave one of the dogs a kick. The animal got up and made for a sort of wheel, which he entered with a reluctant and pitiful air, casting a reproachful glance at me as he did so. At last, seeing there was no hope of a respite he began to turn his wheel, and at the same time the fowl upon which I was to sup revolved. I made up my mind to reward him for his trouble with the bits, and while waiting for my supper began to look around the kitchen.

Large oak joists crossed the ceiling, blistered and blackened by the smoke from the fireplace and candles. Upon the dressers gleamed in the shadow pewter dishes brighter than silver and blue and white crockery. Along the walls were rows of well-scoured saucepans, not unlike the ancient shields which used to hang in a row along the sides of the Greek or Roman triremes (forgive me, Graciosa, for the epic magnificence of this comparison). One or two big servants moved around a large table and arranged crockery and knives and forks, producing music most pleasing to the hungry, for then the hearing of the stomach is keener than the ear. To sum up, in spite of the host's appearance, the inn itself had an honest and pleasant enough look; and however unattractive the innkeeper had been, the rain began to beat upon the windows and the wind to howl in a way which would have removed any desire on the traveler's part to go further, for I know nothing more mournful than such sounds on a dark and stormy night.

A thought came to me which made me smile; it was that no one in the world would look for me there. Really, who would have suspected that little Madelaine, instead of being asleep in her warm bed, with her lamp by her side, a novel under her pillow, and her maid in the next room ready to run to her side at the least sound, was sitting upon a straw chair in a country inn twenty leagues from home, with her feet on the firedogs and her little hands buried in her pockets?

Yes, Madelaine did not remain, like her schoolfellows, with her elbows idly resting on the edge of the balcony between the convolvulus and the jasmine at the window, gazing over the plain at the violet fringes of the horizon, or at some little rose-colored cloud rounded by the breeze. She had not built in her imagination a palace in which to lodge her chimeræ; she had not, like you beautiful dreamers, clothed some hollow phantom with all imaginable perfections. She desired to know men before giving herself to a man; she left everything — her beautiful dresses of bright-colored velvets and silks, her necklaces, her bracelets, her birds, and her flowers; she voluntarily renounced adoration, gallantry, bouquets and madrigals, even the pleasure of being considered more beautiful and better dressed than yourself, her sweet woman's name, and everything which comprised her life, and the brave girl went away quite alone to obtain throughout the world a knowledge of life.

If it were known people would say Madelaine was mad. You said so yourself, my dear Graciosa; but the real mad women are those who cast their souls to the wind, and sow their love haphazard upon stone and rock, without knowing whether a single seed will take root.

O Graciosa! this is a thought I never had without terror; to love some one who was unworthy! To lay bare my soul to impure eyes, and allow an unbeliever to penetrate into the sanctuary of my heart! To mingle for a time the limpid waters with a muddy stream! However perfectly they might be separated, some of the mud would be sure to remain and the stream would never recover its former transparency.

To think a man had kissed and touched you; had seen your body; that he could say, "She is just so; she has such a mark in a certain place; she has such a shadow in her soul; she laughs because of this and weeps for that; her dream is come to pass; this ring is plaited with her hair; a bit of her heart is folded in this letter; she caressed me in such a way, and that was her usual loving greeting."

Ah! Cleopatra, I now understand why you had killed in the morning your lover of the night. Sublime cruelty it seemed, for which I used to lack sufficient imprecations! Great goddess of pleasure, how deep was your knowledge of human nature, and what penetration there was in that barbarity! You did not desire any living creature to divulge the secrets of your bed; the words of love, snatched from your lips, must never be repeated. You thus retained your pure illusion. Experience did not come to despoil bit by bit this charming phantom you had nursed in your arms. You preferred to be separated from it by a quick blow of the ax rather than by slow-moving disgust. What punishment it must be to a woman to see the man she has chosen lie every minute with the idea that she is enamored of him; to discover in his character a thousand unsuspected meannesses; to see that the thing which has appeared so beautiful through the prism of love is really very ugly, and that the man who has been taken for a real hero of romance is only a prosaic citizen, wearing slippers and a dressing gown!

I have not Cleopatra's power, and if I possessed it I should certainly not have the strength to use it. So, being unable and unwilling to cut off the heads of my lovers when they leave my bed, and also being unwilling to bear what other women endure, I must of necessity look twice before taking a lover; that is what I shall do three times rather than twice if I feel so inclined, though I doubt it very much, after what I have seen and heard, unless I meet in some happy land a heart like my own, as the novelists say, a pure and virgin heart which has never loved, though capable of love in the true sense of the word; but that is not an easy thing to find.

Several gentlemen entered the inn; the storm and the darkness had prevented them from continuing their journey. They were all young, the eldest being certainly not more than thirty. Their clothes betokened that they belonged to the upper classes, and so did their insolent manners. One or two of them had interesting faces; the others all had, in a more or less marked degree, that sort of brutal joviality and careless good-fellowship which men display among themselves, but of which they entirely rid themselves when they are in our presence.

If they had suspected that the slender young fellow, half asleep upon his chair in the chimney corner, was indeed a young girl (a morsel fit for a king, is the expression they use), certainly they would very quickly have changed their tone, they would have bridled up and spread out their feathers. They would have approached with elaborate politeness, their legs straight, their elbows squared, a smile in their eyes, on their lips, in fact all over them; they would have carefully selected the words they uttered, only making use of phrases of velvet and satin; at the slightest movement on my part they would have seemed to be ready to lie down and take the place of a carpet, so that my delicate feet should not be offended by the inequalities of the floor; their hands would have been outstretched to support me; the most comfortable seat would have been placed for me in the best position; but I looked like a handsome boy, not a pretty girl.

I admit I almost regretted my skirts when I saw how little attention they paid me. I was, for a moment, quite mortified; for from time to time I forgot that I was dressed as a man, and I was obliged to think or I should have become quite cross.

I was sitting there in silence, with my arms folded, my attention apparently fixed upon the fowl, which was gradually assuming a darker tint, and the unfortunate dog I had so unluckily disturbed.

The youngest of the party gave me a tap on the shoulder, hurting me a little and causing me to utter a little involuntary cry, and asked me if I would not prefer to sup with them rather than alone, inasmuch as a man could drink more in company. I replied that it was a pleasure I had not dared to expect, and that I would gladly do so. The supper was laid at one table, and we took our places.

The panting dog, after lapping up in a moment an enormous bowl of water, resumed his seat opposite the other dog, which had made no more movement than if it had been carved out of stone, the new comers not having ordered a fowl by a fortunate chance.

I learned from a few phrases they let fall that they were bound for the Court, which was then at ——, where they were to join several friends. I told them I was a young fellow who had just left the university, and who was returning to his relatives in the provinces by the scholars' usual route, the longest way he could find. That made them laugh, and after a few observations upon my candid and innocent air they asked me if I had a mistress. I replied that I did not know, and they laughed more loudly still. The glasses followed one another with great rapidity; although I took care to nearly always leave mine full, I became a little excited, and never losing sight of my idea, I managed to turn the conversation on to the subject of women. It was not a difficult matter, for after theology and æsthetics it is the subject men most willingly discuss when they are intoxicated.

The friends were not precisely intoxicated, for they carried their wine too well for that; but they began never-ending moral discussions and unceremoniously put their elbows on the table. One of them put his arm round the ample waist of one of the servants and fondled her most amorously; another swore that he would place a kiss upon each of Jeanette's fat red cheeks. Jeanette gave way with a good grace, and did not even stop a hand which audaciously found its way between the folds of her neckerchief, into the moist valley of her throat, badly protected as it was by a little gold cross, and it was only after a short conversation in an undertone that he let her go to change the dishes.

They were fashionable folk, and certainly unless I had actually seen it I should never have accused them of such familiarities with inn servants. It is probable that they had just left charming mistresses, to whom they had made the most beautiful vows; for really I should never have thought of telling my lover not to soil lips where I had placed mine.

The fellow seemed to take as much pleasure in this kiss as if he had embraced Phillis or Oriane; it was a resounding smack, heavily and solidly applied, leaving two little white marks upon the cheek, the traces of which the girl removed with the back of her hand as she was washing the dishes. I do not believe he had ever given so tender a one to the pure deity of his heart. That was apparently his own thought, for he said in an undertone with a disdainful movement of the elbow:

"To the devil with thin women and noble sentiments." This moral appeared to the taste of the party, and all nodded their heads as a sign of assent.

"Really," the other one said, following out his idea, "I am always unlucky. Gentlemen, I must tell you, under a bond of secrecy, that I have at this moment a passion!

"She is an honorable woman, gentlemen. You must not laugh, for why should she not be an honorable woman? Have I said anything ridiculous? Stop, or if you do not I will throw the house at your head."

"Ah well! What next?"

"She is madly in love with me. Hers is the most beautiful soul in the world; I am as good a judge of souls as I am of horses, and I can guarantee her soul is first quality. There is in it elevation, ecstasy, devotion, sacrifice, and refined tenderness, in fact everything imaginable; but she has hardly any figure, like that of a girl of fifteen. She is pretty, too; her hand is fine, her foot small; she has too much mind, and not enough flesh. I am very unfortunate. Pity me, friends." Made maudlin by the wine he had drunk, he burst into tears.

"Jeanette will console you for your misfortune," his neighbor said as he poured him out a bumper; "her soul is so thick it could provide other persons with bodies, and she has enough flesh to clothe the carcasses of three elephants."

O pure and noble woman! if you knew what was said of you at an inn in the presence of strangers by the man you love best in the world, for whom you have sacrificed everything! How he shamelessly exposed you and betrayed you to the intoxicated glances of his comrades, while you in your sorrow, with your chin resting in your hand, were waiting with eyes fixed upon the road by which he would return.

If any one had told you that your lover, twenty-four hours perhaps after leaving you, had made love to a common servant, and kissed her, you would have maintained that such a thing was quite impossible and you would not have believed it; you would hardly have credited your own eyes and ears. Still, there it was.

The conversation lasted for some time, and was the most foolish and licentious possible; but through all the clownish exaggeration and filthy jokes was visible a real and profound sentiment of entire contempt for woman, and I learned more in that evening than in reading twenty cartloads of the works of moralists.

The more heinous and extraordinary things I heard gave my face an expression of sadness and severity which the other guests noticed and about which they twitted me; but my gayety did not return. I had suspected that men were not just as they appeared before us, but I did not believe them so different from the masks they wore, and my surprise equaled my disgust.

It would only require one half-hour of such conversation to correct the romantic tendencies of any young girl; that would be a better remedy than all maternal remonstrance.

Some boasted of their conquests, and the ease and rapidity with which they were made; others communicated recipes for obtaining mistresses, or discoursed upon the tactics to be employed in the seige of virtue; some turned into ridicule the women whose lovers they were, and thus proclaimed themselves to be the greatest imbeciles on earth for being captivated by such sluts. They all made love very cheap.

Such then are the thoughts concealed beneath some handsome exteriors! Who would believe it when seeing these men so humble, so servile, and so obliging? Ah, how boldly after conquest do they raise their heads, and insolently put the heels of their boots upon the face they adored from afar on bended knees! What revenge they take for their temporary debasement! How dearly do they make the women pay for their politeness! What frantic brutality of language and thought is theirs; what inelegance of manners and deportment! It is a complete change, certainly not to their advantage. Though my suspicions had been considerable, they fell far short of the reality.

At last the supper ended and it was time to retire for the night; but as the number of sleepers was double that of the beds, it naturally followed that it was necessary to sleep one after the other or else two together. It was a simple enough matter for the rest of the company, but not so for me, particularly with regard to certain curves and protuberances which, though concealed well enough by the jacket and doublet, would be obvious enough beneath a shirt alone, and really I did not feel disposed to violate my incognito in favor of any of those gentlemen, who just then appeared to me to be real naïve monsters, although I have since decided that they were very good comrades, and at least as good as their fellows.

The one whose bed I had to share was reasonably drunk. He threw himself upon the bed with an arm and leg upon the floor, and went off to sleep at once, not the sleep of the just, but such a deep sleep that the angel of the last judgment would have required to blow the trump in his ear and then perhaps would not have awakened him. This sleep very much simplified matters; I merely took off my jacket and boots, stepped over the sleeper's body, and lay down next the wall.

So I was sleeping in the same bed as a man! That was not a bad beginning! I confess that in spite of all my assurance I was strangely troubled and disturbed. The situation was so strange, so novel, that I could hardly admit it was not a dream. My bedfellow slept soundly, while I did not close an eye all night.

He was a young man of about twenty-four, good-looking, with black eyelashes, almost a blond mustache, and long black hair; a slight flush was upon his pale cheeks, and his parted lips wore a vague and languishing smile.

I raised myself upon my elbow, and I remained for some time gazing at him in the flickering light of an expiring candle.

We were some distance apart. He was on the extreme outside of the bed, while I lay as a matter of precaution on the other edge.

Certainly all that I had heard was not of the nature to predispose me to tenderness and voluptuousness. I had a horror of men. Still I was very disturbed and more uneasy than I ought to have been; my body did not share the repugnance of my mind as much as it ought. My heart beat fast, I was warm, and turn into whatever position I would, I could not go to sleep.

The most profound silence reigned throughout the inn; only in the distance could be heard the dull thud made by a horse's hoof in the stable, or the sound of a spot of water dropping on the ashes. The candle went out.

The blackest darkness rose between us like a curtain. You cannot imagine the effect produced upon me by the sudden disappearance of the light. It seemed to me that everything was finished, and that I could no longer see my own life clearly. One moment I felt a desire to get up; but what could I have done? It was only two o'clock in the morning, the lights were all out, and I could not wander like a ghost about a strange house. I was forced to stay where I was and wait for daylight.

I was there upon my back, my hands clasped, trying to think of something, but always reverting to the one fact, that I was sleeping in the same bed as a man. I even felt a desire for him to awaken and discover that I was a woman. Without a doubt the wine I had drunk, though but a small quantity, was to some extent responsible for these extravagant ideas, but I could not help reverting to them. I was in the act of stretching out my arm to awaken him, when a ridge in the bedclothes stopped me; that gave me time to reflect, and while I freed my arm my lost senses returned, if not altogether, at least sufficiently to restrain me.

I certainly did not love the man who caused me this strange agitation. His only charm was that he was not a woman, and in my state of mind that was enough! A man! that mysterious creature from whom we are shielded with such great care, the strange animal of whose history we know so little, the god or demon who alone can realize all the dreams of vague pleasure with which the spring cradles our sleep, and the only thought a girl has after she is fifteen!

A man! The confused idea of pleasure floated in my heavy head. The little I knew still inflamed my desire. An ardent curiosity urged me to satisfy once and for all the doubts which embarrassed me and continually returned to my mind. The solution of the problem was behind the page; it only required turning and the book was at my side. A good-looking fellow, a narrow bed, a dark night! a young girl with a few glasses of champagne in her head! What a suspicious combination! But all that resulted in a most honorable nothing.

Upon the wall where I kept my eyes fixed as the darkness decreased I began to distinguish the window; the panes became less opaque, and the gray morning light as it gradually appeared through them made them transparent; the sky brightened bit by bit: it was day light. You cannot imagine the pleasure given me by the pale dawn as it revealed the green serge hangings which surrounded the glorious field of battle on which my virtue had triumphed over my desire! It seemed to me that it was my crown of victory.

As for my bedfellow, he had slipped right down to the floor.

I got up, dressed myself as quickly as possible, and hastened to the window; I opened it and the morning breeze refreshed me. To arrange my hair I went to the mirror, and I was astonished to find my face so pale when I believed it to be purple.

The others came in to see whether we were still asleep, and with their feet aroused their friend, who did not appear to be at all surprised at his position.

The horses were saddled and we resumed our journey.

But that is enough for to-day; my pen refuses to write, and I do not want to take a new one. I will tell you the rest of my adventures another time. Meanwhile, love me as I love you, Graciosa the well named, and after what I have just told you do not have too poor an opinion of my virtue.

Chapter XI

ROSALIND AND ORLANDO

Many things are tiresome: it is a nuisance to have to repay borrowed money which one has come to regard as a gift; it is a trouble to caress to-day the woman one loved yesterday; it is a bore to call at a house at dinner time and find that the owner has gone into the country for a month; it is troublesome to write a novel, and more so to read one; it is a bore to have a pimple on one's nose when one pays a visit to the heart's idol; it is annoying to wear a pair of humorous boots, which smile at the pavement through all the holes in them; it is a bore to be a porter, to be an emperor, to be oneself or even some one else; winter is a nuisance because of the frost, summer because of the heat; but surely the most troublesome thing on earth, in hell, or in heaven is a tragedy, unless it be a comedy or a drama.

That really makes me sick at heart! What can there be more silly or stupid than those great tyrants with the voices of bulls who pace the stage, in flesh-colored tights, waving their arms like the sails of a windmill? Are they not sorry parodies of Bluebeard and the Bogey Man? Their rodomontades would make any one able to keep awake roar with laughter.

Unfortunate lovers are no less ridiculous. It is quite diverting to see them advance, wearing either black or white, with their hair falling upon their shoulders, sleeves weeping over their hands, and the body ready to burst from their corsets like a nut pressed between the fingers; all the while they seem to be dragging the stage after them by the soles of their satin shoes, and in moments of great passion they thrust their trains behind them with a little motion of the heel. The dialogue, entirely composed of an "oh!" and "ah!" which they cluck as they strut about, is really an agreeable dish and one easy of digestion. Their princes, too, are very charming; they are just a little gloomy and melancholy, though this does not prevent them being the best comrades in this world or elsewhere.

As for comedy, which ought to correct manners, and happily does its duty badly, I find that the father's sermons and uncle's twaddle are as soporific on the stage as in real life. I am not of the opinion that the number of fools is doubled by representing them on the stage; there are quite enough, thank God, without that, and the race is in no danger of dying out. Where is the necessity to give a representation of some one with the snout of a pig or the muzzle of an ox, and to listen to the twaddle of an idiot who would be thrown out of the window if he came to one's house? The part of a snob is quite as uninteresting as the snob himself, and being seen through a mirror he is none the less a snob. An actor who could succeed in imitating with exactness the poses and manners of a cobbler would be no more amusing than a real cobbler.

But it is the fantastic, extravagant, and impossible theater I love, where the honest public would pitilessly hiss after the first scene, having failed to understand a word of it.

That is a strange theater. Glow worms take the place of the footlights; a scarab beating time with his antennæ is at the conductor's desk. The cricket takes his part; the nightingale is first flute; little sylphs from the flower of the peas hold violincellos of lemon peel between their legs, which are whiter than ivory, and flourish with plenty of energy their bows, made of one of Titania's lashes, upon strings of cobweb; the little wig which the scarab, leader of the orchestra, wears trembles with pleasure, and sheds around a luminous dust, so sweet is the harmony and well played the overture!

A curtain of butterflies' wings, finer than the inner pellicle of an egg, rises slowly after the regulation three taps. The house is filled with the souls of poets sitting in the mother-of-pearl stalls, who watch the performance through drops of dew mounted upon the golden pistils of lilies. Their opera glasses are like that.

The scenery is not like any known scenery; the landscape it represents is more unknown than was America before its discovery. The palette of the richest painter has not half the shades displayed in it. Everything is painted in strange and singular colors; green, blue, yellow, and red are lavished upon it.

The sky, of a greenish blue, is striped with wide bands of light and fawn; little thin and delicate trees in the background display foliage of a dried-rose tint; the horizon, instead of fading away in an azure mist, is of the most beautiful apple green, with here and there spirals of golden smoke rising from it. A wandering ray of light rests upon the frontal of a ruined temple or upon the spire of a tower. Towns full of towers, pyramids, domes, arcades, and declivities are located upon hills and cast their reflections into crystal lakes; mighty trees with great leaves, deeply indented by the chisels of the fairies, inextricably intermingle their trunks and branches to make the wings. The clouds in the sky heap themselves up one above the other like snowflakes, and scintillating in the spaces between them can be seen the eyes of gnomes and dwarfs, while their twisted roots plunge into the earth like the finger of a giant's hand. The green woodpecker taps them in tune with his hard beak, and emerald lizards warm themselves in the sun.

The mushroom watches the comedy with his hat on his head, like the insolent fellow he is; the tiny violet rises upon tiptoe between two blades of grass, and opens wide its blue eyes to see the hero pass.

The bullfinch and the linnet sit at the end of the branches to whisper to the actors their parts.

Through the deep undergrowth tall purple thistles and burdocks with velvet leaves wind like silver snakes. Streams composed of the tears of stags at bay sparkle: here and there are to be seen gleaming in the grass anemones like drops of blood, and marguerites wearing upon their heads coronets of pearls, like real duchesses.

The characters are of no period nor land; they come and go without the spectators knowing why or how; they neither eat nor drink, they stay nowhere and have no profession; they possess neither land, income, nor dwelling. Sometimes they carry under their arms a little case of diamonds as large as pigeons' eggs; as they walk they do not dislodge a single dewdrop from the flowers, nor do they raise a single grain of dust on the highway.

Their clothes are the most extravagant and fantastic possible. They wear pointed hats with borders as large as a Chinese parasol, and tremendous plumes from the tail of the bird of paradise or the phœnix. Their capes are striped with brilliant colors; their doublets of velvet and brocade display vests of satin or silver cloth through the gold lace; their hose are puffed out and distended like balloons; while scarlet stockings, embroidered shoes with high heels and large rosettes, little slender swords, points in the air, hilts in the hand, loops and ribbons complete the men's equipment.

The women are no less curiously attired. The drawings of Della Bella and Romain de Hooge give some idea of their apparel; they wear stuffed and undulating dresses, with great folds which glisten like the throats of turtle-doves and reflect all the changing tints of the iris; large sleeves from which other sleeves emerge; ruffs of lace, rising higher than the head, for which they serve as a frame; corsets covered with bows, embroidery, aiguillettes, strange jewels, aigrettes of heron plumes, and necklaces of large pearls; they carry fans of peacocks' tails with mirrors in the middle of them and are equipped with everything necessary for a visit to the theater.

It is a taste which is not quite English, German, French, Turkish, Spanish, nor Tartar, though having something of each, taking in the most graceful and characteristic part from each country. Actors attired in this way can say anything they please without making it appear incongruous.

How amusing and charming are their speeches! These are not the sort of actors to twist their mouths and make their eyes start from their heads in a search after effect; at least they do not give the impression of being workers at their task, or yoked oxen in haste to finish their journey; they are not plastered with powder and rouge to the depth of half an inch; they do not wear daggers of tin, nor do they keep in reserve beneath their cloaks a bladder of blood; they do not wear the same oil-stained rags for entire acts.

They speak without haste, without shouting, like well-bred persons who do not attach much importance to what they are saying. The lover makes his declaration to his mistress with the most unconcerned air in the world; while talking he flicks his thigh with the end of his white gloves. The lady nonchalantly shakes the dew from her bouquet; the lover makes little effort to soften her cruelty, his principal business is to let fall from his lips the pearls and sow with lavish hand the precious stones of poesy; often even he quite effaces himself and allows the author to court his mistress for him. Jealousy is not his failing, and he is of a most accommodating humor. With uplifted eyes he complacently waits till the poet has finished to resume his part and fall down upon his knees.

Everything winds and unwinds itself with admirable carelessness; the effects have no cause, and the causes have no effect. The cleverest person is the one who makes the most foolish remarks; the most foolish persons say the cleverest things; young girls converse in a way which would make old courtesans blush; courtesans give utterance to moral maxims. The most extraordinary adventures succeed each other without any explanation; the noble father arrives posthaste from China in a bamboo junk to recognize a long-lost daughter; the gods and fairies descend to earth and ascend to heaven again. The action plunges into the sea beneath the topaz dome of the waves and traverses the bed of the ocean through forests of coral and madrepores, or ascends to heaven upon the wings of the lark or the griffon. The dialogue is universal. The lion contributes to it with a vigorous "ugh!" the wall speaks through its crevices; and provided that it has a point, a rebus, or a pun, each is free to interrupt the most interesting scene; the ass's head of Bottom is as welcome as Ariel's fair face. The spirit of the author is displayed in every form; and all these contradictions are like so many facets which reflect its different aspects, while adding the colors of the prism.

This pell-mell and apparent disorder depict real life under its fantastic appearance more exactly than the most minutely studied drama of manners. Every man encloses in himself entire humanity, and in writing whatever enters his head he succeeds better than in copying with a magnifying glass the objects placed about him.

Of this theater, written for the fairies, there is a piece which ought to be performed in the moonlight and delights me greatly; it is a play so inconsequent, the plot of which is so airy and the characters so strange, that the author himself, not knowing what title to give it, called it "As You Like It"—an elastic name which answers for anything.

In reading this strange play you feel yourself transported into an unknown world of which a vague reminiscence lingers; a doubt arises as to whether you are dead or alive, waking or sleeping; gracious faces smile sweetly upon you, and give you a friendly greeting as they pass. You feel moved and troubled at the sight of them, as if suddenly, at a turn of the road, you are about to meet your ideal, or the forgotten phantom of an old mistress will rise up unexpectedly before you. Springs flow with a half-audible murmur; the wind sways with tender sighs the old trees of the ancient forest above the head of the aged exiled duke; and when James the melancholy utters to the stream of water his sorrowful philosophy, it seems as if you are yourself speaking, and as if the most secret and obscure thought of your heart is being revealed and illuminated.

A young son of the brave chevalier Rowland of the Woods, so ill-treated by fortune! I cannot help being jealous of you; you have still one faithful follower, Adam, whose age is so green beneath his white hair. You are banished, but at least you have first struggled and triumphed; your evil brother carries off all your possessions, but Rosalind gives you the necklace from her throat. You are poor, but you are loved; you leave your own country, but the daughter of your persecutor follows you beyond the seas.

The black Ardennes open their great leafy arms to receive and conceal you; the kind forest gathers in its grottos the softest moss for your bed; it inclines its arches above your head to protect you from rain and sun; it pities you with the tears of its springs and the sighs of its fawns and deer; it turns its rocks into willing desks for your love letters; it lends the thorns of its bushes to suspend them, and orders the satin bark of its aspens to yield to the point of your pen when you wish to write to Rosalind.

If one could, young Orlando, have like you a mighty and shady forest into which to withdraw and isolate oneself in sorrow, and if at the turn of a path one were to meet the woman one sought, recognizable though disguised! But, alas, the world of the soul has no leafy Ardennes, and it is only in the garden of poesy that the little wild and capricious flowers, whose perfume makes one forget everything, grow. In vain do we shed tears, they do not form those beautiful silvery cascades; in vain we sigh, no pitying echo answers us. In vain do we attach sonnets to the thorns of the brambles, for Rosalind does not gather them, and it is of no avail for us to cover the bark of the trees with words of love.

Birds of the sky, each one lend me a feather, the swallow as well as the eagle, so that I may construct a pair of wings with which to fly high and quickly to unknown lands, where I shall find nothing to recall me to the city of the living, where I can forget that I am myself, and live a life strange and new — further off than America, further than Africa, further than Asia, further than the remotest island in the world, by the sea of ice beyond the pole where the Aurora Borealis flashes, in the impalpable realm whither the divine creations of the poets and types of supreme beauty wing their way.

How is a person to endure the ordinary drawing-room chatter after hearing sparkling Mercutio talk, whose every phrase bursts into a rain of gold and silver, like a firework bomb beneath a sky studded with stars? What women do not seem ugly by the side of your Venuses, ancient sculptors, poets with marble strophes?

Ah, in spite of the furious embrace with which I wished to envelop the material world failing the other, I feel that I am ill-born, that life is not made for me and that it repels me. I cannot mix in anything; whatever path I follow I lose my way; the level road, the rocky path equally lead me to the abyss. If I wish to take my flight, the air condenses around me, and I remain in captivity with extended wings, unable to close them. I can neither walk nor fly; the sky attracts me when I am on earth, the earth when I am in the sky; in the air the north wind plucks my feathers from me; on earth the stones hurt my feet. I have too tender soles to walk upon real bits of glass; too narrow an expanse of wing to soar in the air, to rise and circle in the profound azure of mysticism to the inaccessible heights of eternal love. I am the most unfortunate hippogriff, the most miserable collection of heterogeneous morsels that has ever existed since the Ocean loved the Moon and women have deceived men; the monstrous Chimera put to death by Bellerophon, with its maiden's head, its lion's claws, its goat's body, and dragon's tail, was an animal of simple composition compared with me.

In my frail breast dwell together the violet-strewn dreams of the blushing maid and the mad passion of the courtesan; my desires come like lions, sharpening their claws in the shade and seeking something to devour; my thoughts, more restless and uneasy than goats, hang from the most dangerous ridges; my hate, steeped in poison, twists into inextricable knots its scaly folds and drags its length in the ruts and ravines.

My soul is a strange land, flourishing and splendid in appearance, but more saturated with putrid and deleterious miasmas than the country of Batavia. The slightest sunshine upon the slime there hatches the reptiles and spreads abroad the mosquitoes; the large yellow tulips and the angsoka flowers pompously veil shameful carrion. The amorous rose opens its scarlet lips, and smiling shows its little teeth of dew to the gallant nightingales who recite madrigals and sonnets to it. Nothing is more charming; but it is a hundred to one that in the grass beneath the bush a dropsical toad is crawling upon its unsteady feet and leaving its track of slime.

There are springs clearer and more limpid than the finest diamond; but it would be better to drain the stagnant water of the morass beneath its covering of rotted rushes and dead dogs than to dip the drinking cup in these pools. A serpent is hidden in their depths which moves with frightful rapidity and disgorges its venom.

If you plant wheat, asphodel, henbane, tares, and hemlock spring up. Instead of the root you plant you will be very surprised to see rise from the earth the rough and twisted limbs of the black mandrake.

If you leave a souvenir there and come some time later to recover it, you will find it more mossy and covered with wood lice and disgusting insects than a stone placed upon the damp earth of a cellar.

Do not try to cross its darkening forests; they are more impracticable than the virgin forests of America and the jungles of Java. Creepers strong as cables hang from tree to tree; plants bristling and pointed like spear heads obstruct all the paths; the earth itself is covered with a burning growth like the nettle. In the arches of the foliage hang by their claws gigantic bats of the vampire species; beetles of enormous size wave threatening horns and beat the air with their fourfold wings; monstrous and fantastic animals, like those we see in nightmares, advance painfully, breaking the reeds before them. There are herds of elephants which crush flies between the wrinkles of their dry skin or rub their flanks against stones and trees, there is the rhinoceros, with its rugged armor, and the hippopotamus with its inflated muzzle and bristling hair, which knead the mud and the débris of the forest with their huge feet.

In the clearings, where a ray of the sun penetrates through the humid atmosphere, at the spot where you would have liked to sit down, you will always find some family of tigers nonchalantly lying and sniffing up the air through their nostrils, blinking their sea-green eyes, and dressing their velvet fur with blood-red tongues covered with papillæ; or else there is a group of boa constrictors half asleep as they digest the last ox they have swallowed.

Fear everything; the grass, fruit, water, air, shade, and sunlight—everything is deadly.

Close your ears to the chatter of the little parrakeets with golden beaks and emerald necks, which come down from the trees and settle upon your fingers with fluttering wings; for though they have golden beaks and emerald necks, they will end by gently pecking out your eyes at the moment you stoop to fondle them.

The world does not require me; it repulses me like a specter escaped from the tombs; my pallor is almost of that nature; my blood refuses to believe that I am alive, and will not color my skin; it trails slowly through my veins like stagnant water in an overgrown canal. My heart does not beat for anything a man's heart should. My sorrows and joys are not those of my fellows. I have violently desired that which no man desires; I have disdained the things most sought after by men. I have loved women when they did not love me, and I have been loved when I would rather have been hated; it has always been either too soon or too late, never just right. I have either not arrived or been too far away. I have cast my life from the windows or concentrated it too much upon a single point; and from the restless activity of the busybody I have come to the mournful somnolence of the Stylite upon his column.

My deeds always have the appearance of a dream; my actions seem rather the result of somnambulism than of a free will; something is in me—I feel it obscurely very deep down—which makes me act without my own participation and always outside common laws; the simple and natural side of things is only revealed to me last of all, and I first of all seize upon the bizarre and eccentric. However little the line slants, I will soon make it into a spiral more twisted than a serpent; the contours, if they are not fixed in the most precise fashion, waver and lose their shape. Faces take a supernatural appearance and look at me with terrifying eyes.

So, by a sort of instinctive reaction, I am always despairingly clinging to the material, to the external silhouette of things, and in art I have given the plastic a very prominent place. I perfectly understand a statue, but I do not understand a man; where life begins I stop and recoil in terror as if I have caught sight of the head of the Medusa. The phenomenon of life causes me an astonishment of which I cannot rid myself. I shall without a doubt make an excellent corpse, for I am a poor enough mortal, and the feeling of my existence completely escapes me. The sound of my own voice surprises me to an unthinkable extent, and sometimes I feel tempted to take it for the voice of another. When I desire to stretch out my arm, and my arm obeys me, that appears to me quite wonderful, and a feeling of the most profound stupefaction overcomes me.

To sum up, Silvio, I perfectly understand the unintelligible; the most extravagant gifts seem to me quite natural and I enter into them with singular facility. I can easily follow the windings of the most capricious and disordered nightmare. That is the reason the kind of plays I mentioned just now pleases me more than any other.

We, Theodore, Rosette, and myself, have great arguments on this subject. Rosette has little taste for my choice, she is in favor of realism: Theodore gives the poet more latitude and admits the truth of convention and illusion; I myself maintain that it is necessary to give the author an absolutely clear field where fantasy can hold entire sway.

Many persons of the company relied principally upon the argument that such plays were generally unsuitable for the conditions of the theater and could not be performed. I replied that it was true in one sense and false in another, just as is almost everything, and that the ideas held of the possibilities and impossibilities of the stage seemed to me to lack precision and savor more of prejudice than of reason, and I said among other things that the play "As You Like It" was certainly quite actable, especially to fashionable people unaccustomed to other parts.

That gave me the idea of performing it. The season is getting on, and every form of amusement is exhausted; we are weary of the chase, of riding and boating parties, while the luck of cards, however varied it may be, is not sufficient to occupy the evenings, so the proposal was enthusiastically received.

A young man who could paint offered to do the scenery; he is now working at it most energetically and in a few days will have finished. The theater is fitted up in the orangery, which is the largest room of the château, and I think all will be well. I shall take the part of Orlando. Rosette had in justice to her to be cast for the part of Rosalind; as my mistress and the lady of the house the part is hers by right; but she did not wish to disguise herself as a man, through some caprice very strange in one in whom prudery is not a failing. If I had not been sure of the contrary, I should have thought she had badly shaped legs. Really none of the ladies of the company wished to appear less scrupulous than Rosette, and that fact nearly wrecked the play; but Theodore, whose part is that of James the melancholy, offered to replace her, considering that as Rosalind is almost always dressed as a man except in the first act, where she appears as a woman, he could with make-up, a corset, and a dress look the part well enough, as he has no beard and a very slender waist.

We are engaged in learning our parts, and it is very curious to see us. In all the lonely corners of the park you are sure to come upon some one book in hand mumbling phrases in an undertone, with eyes raised to heaven and then suddenly lowered, and seven or eight times repeating the same gesture. If it were not known that we were to play the comedy, assuredly we should be taken for a house full of lunatics or poets (which is almost exactly the same thing).

I think we shall soon know enough to have a rehearsal. I am expecting something very curious at it. Perhaps I am mistaken. I was for a time afraid that our actors, instead of performing by inspiration, would attempt to imitate the poses and vocal inflections of some fashionable comedian; but happily they are not ardent enough theater goers to make this mistake, and it is likely that they will display, amid the bashfulness of people who have never before acted, precious gleams of naturalness, and those charming naïvetés which the most consummate talent cannot imitate.

Our young painter has really done wonders; it is impossible to give a stranger appearance to the old tree trunks and the ivy entwining them than he has done; he has taken as his model the trees in the park, accentuating and exaggerating them in the manner necessary for scenery. Everything is touched with admirable pride and caprice: the stones, rocks, and clouds are mysteriously threatening in shape; gleaming reflections are thrown upon the moving waters, and the usual coldness of the foliage is marvelously relieved by the saffron tints introduced into it by the touch of autumn; the forest varies from emerald-green to purple; the warmest and freshest tones mingle harmoniously, and the sky itself extends from the most tender blue to the most fiery red.

He has designed all the costumes from my sketches; they are most beautiful in character. At first the cry was that they could not be translated into silk and velvet nor any known material, and the moment almost came for the troubadour costume to be generally adopted. The ladies said that the glaring colors would dim their eyes. To this we replied that their eyes were unquenchable stars, and that, on the other hand, their eyes would dull the colors, and even the footlights, the luster, and the sun. They had no reply to make to that; but there were other objections which rejected in a body bristled like the hydra of Lerna; no sooner was the head of one cut off than another, more obstinate and more stupid, took its place.

"How can you expect that to fasten? It is all right on paper, but quite a different matter to wear. I shall never come on wearing that! My skirt is at least four inches too short; I shall never dare to appear like this! This ruff is too high; I look as if I am humpbacked and without a neck. This head dress ages me terribly."

With starch, pins, and good temper everything was smoothed over. "You must be joking! A waist like yours, more slender than a wasp's, which would pass through the ring on my little finger! I will wager twenty-five pounds to a kiss that the corsage will have to be taken in. Your skirt is far from being too short, and if you could only see what an adorable leg you have, you would certainly be of my opinion. Quite the contrary, your neck stands out, and is admirably outlined in its halo of lace. This head dress does not age you at all, and even if you were to appear a few years older, you are so excessively young that it would be a matter of no consequence to you; really you would give us strange suspicions, if we did not know where the bits of your last doll were."

You cannot imagine the amount of flattery we were compelled to use to persuade our ladies to put on the charming costumes which suited them so well.

What a terrible taste women have! What titanic obstinacy is possessed by a feather-brained little woman who thinks that yellow suits her better than the jonquil or the rose. I am sure that if I had applied to public business half the ruses and intrigues that I have employed to get a red feather placed on the left side instead of the right, I should be a minister or even an emperor.

What pandemonium! What an enormous and inextricable mob must a real theater be!

Since acting the comedy was first mentioned everything here has been in a complete state of disorder. All the drawers are open, all the cupboards empty; it has been a real pillage. The tables and couches are all crowded, there is hardly room to step; prodigious quantities of dresses, cloaks, veils, skirts, capes, and hats trail through the house; and when it is taken into consideration that they are all for the bodies of seven or eight persons, one cannot help unwittingly recollecting those clowns at the fairs who wear eight or ten coats one over the other, and it is not possible to realize that out of this great mass only one costume for each person will emerge.

The servants run hither and thither; there are always two or three of them on the way from the château to the town, and if this sort of thing continues all the horses will become broken winded.

A stage manager has no time to be melancholy, and I have hardly been sad for some time. I am so stupefied and plagued that I begin to lose my grip of the play. As I fill the part of the impresario as well as that of Orlando, my task is a double one. When a difficulty arises I am consulted, and my decision not being always regarded as an oracle interminable discussions ensue.

If life consists of being always on one's feet answering twenty persons at once, ascending and descending staircases, and not having a moment to think during the day, I have never lived so much as during this last week; I do not, however, take as great a part in the movement as you might imagine. The agitation is only skin-deep, and life does not penetrate me as easily as that; although I seem to be acting and mixing in all that is going on, I am at the same time living the least of all. Action stupefies and fatigues me to an extent it is impossible to realize; when I do not act I am thinking, or at least I am dreaming, and that is a mode of existence.

Up to the present time I have done nothing, and I am not aware if I ever shall do anything. I do not know how to control my brains, and that comprises the difference between the man of talent and the man of genius; it is a never-ending effervescence, wave following wave; I cannot master the kind of internal jet which mounts from my heart to my head and which drowns all my thoughts for lack of outlets. I cannot produce anything, not from sterility, but through superabundance; my ideas are so strong and numerous that they are stifled and cannot mature. Never can execution, however rapid, attain such velocity. When I write a phrase the thought it conveys is as far away from me as if a century had elapsed instead of a second, and often it happens that I unconsciously mingle an idea with the one succeeding it.

That is why I do not know how to live, either as a poet or as a lover. I can only reproduce the ideas I have ceased to possess; I only gain the affections of women when I have forgotten them and love others; man, how can I let my mind be seen, since however much I hate myself, I have no longer the consciousness of what I am doing, and I act only according to a full reminiscence?

Take a thought from one's brain; let it be first of all as unpolished as a block of marble roughhewn from the quarry; place it before oneself, and from morning till evening, chisel in one hand and mallet in the other, tap, carve, and scrape; that is a method I could never adopt.

In imagination I can easily evolve the slender face from the rough block, and I can see it very clearly; but there are so many corners to remove, so many chips to detach, so many taps of the mallet to be delivered before the right shape is attained and the correct contour reached, that my hands become blistered and I let fall my chisel.

If I persist the fatigue becomes so intense that my inner sight is totally obscured, and I cannot see through the opaque marble the white divinity concealed in its depths. Then I pursue it haphazard, as if by a sense of touch; I cut too deeply in one place, and not far enough forward in another. I take away what ought to be the leg or arm, and I have a compact mass where a space ought to be; in place of a goddess I make an ape, and sometimes not even that, and the magnificent block, obtained at such enormous expense and tremendous labor from the entrails of the earth, carved, hewn, and worked in every way, seems rather to have been gnawed and pierced by the polyps to make a hive, than carved by a sculptor on a given design.

How did you, Michael Angelo, cut the marble into slices like a child carving a marrow? Of what steel were your invincible chisels fashioned? What robust strength your prolific artists and workers must have possessed, a strength which no material could resist, to turn your entire dream into color or bronze?

It is an innocent and to some extent permissible vanity after my cruel remarks about myself, Silvio, and I know you are not the one to blame me for it, for me to say that although the universe will never be aware of the fact, and my name is destined from the first for oblivion, I am a poet and a painter! I have ideas more beautiful than any poet in the world. I have created types as pure and divine as those most greatly admired of the old masters. I see them there, before me, as clearly and distinctly as if they were really painted, and if I could open a hole in my skull and insert a glass for others to view, it would be the most marvelous gallery of pictures ever seen. No king on earth can boast of the possession of such a one; the pictures, which are in a style peculiar to myself, would not be disdained by any one. I know it seems strange for me to say this, and that I must appear intoxicated with the most foolish self-conceit but it is so, and nothing will shake my conviction. No one, without a doubt, will share it with me.

I have sometimes even a difficulty in concealing my thoughts on this subject; it often happens that I speak with too great familiarity of these lofty geniuses whose lines one ought to adore, and whose statues one ought to contemplate from a distance on bended knee. Once I so far forgot myself as to include myself with them. Fortunately it was to a person who took no notice, or I should have obtained the reputation of being the most tremendous coxcomb who ever lived.

Am I not, Silvio, a poet and a painter?

It is a mistake to think that all persons who obtained the reputation of genius were really greater men than others. It is impossible to say how many pupils and obscure painters Raphael employed on the works which contributed to his reputation; he lent his signature to the imagination and talents of several, that is all.

A great painter, a great writer occupy and fill by themselves alone an entire century; their most anxious desire is to dabble in all sorts of art and literature, so that if rivals arise they can be the first to accuse them of plagiarism and stop them upon the first rung of the ladder of fame; these are well-known tactics and though not new are successful every day.

It sometimes happens that an already famous man has precisely the same sort of talent that you yourself would have had; to avoid passing for his imitator you are obliged to divert your natural inspiration into a different channel.

For this reason many noble minds are forced to take a route which is not their own, and to perpetually skirt their own domain from which they are banished, still happy to be able to cast a furtive glance over the hedge and see open in the sunlight the beautiful variegated flowers, the seeds of which they possess, but cannot sow for lack of ground.

In my own case I do not know whether I should have made any great mark in the world, for I lack the degree of stupidity necessary to become what is absolutely called a genius, and the enormous obstinacy afterwards deified by the beautiful name of will, when the great man has reached the glorious summit of the mountain, and which is indispensable to reach that spot. I know too well how hollow all such things are, containing, as they do, but putrefaction, to attach myself for too long to any one and pursue it ardently.

Men of genius are very narrow-minded, that is the cause of genius. Their lack of intelligence prevents their seeing the obstacles which separate them from the object they wish to reach; they start, and in two or three strides cover the intervening space. As their mind remains obstinately closed to certain currents, and they only see the things most immediately concerned with their own projects, they attain their object with the least possible expenditure of thought and action. Nothing distracts them, nothing turns them aside; they act rather by instinct than in any other way, and several of them, when removed from their particular sphere, display an incapacity it is difficult to understand.

Certainly it is a rare and charming gift to write verses well; few people please themselves more than I do with poetry; but still I do not desire to bound and circumscribe my life within the twelve feet of an alexandrine; there are a thousand things which disturb me as much as a hemistich, though not the state of society and the reforms it would be necessary to make. I care little enough whether the peasants learn to read or not, or whether men eat bread or browse on grass; but there pass through my head in one hour more than a hundred thousand visions which have not the slightest connection with rests and rhymes, and that is the reason I produce so little while having more ideas than certain poets who ought to be burnt with their own works.

I adore beauty and perceive it; I can utter it as well as the most statuary lovers can convey it, yet I am not a sculptor. The ugliness and imperfection of a rough sketch annoy me; I cannot wait till the work comes by dint of polishing and repolishing to perfection; and if I could make up my mind to allow certain things in what I do, either in verse or painting, I should perhaps end by creating a poem or picture which would make me famous, and those who love me (if there is any one in the world who takes that trouble) would not be compelled to take my word, and would have a triumphant answer to the sardonic sneers of the detractors of that great unknown genius, myself.

As it is, I cannot even succeed in writing a letter as I should like. I often say things quite different from what I intend; some parts swell quite out of proportion to the rest, while others shrink to vanishing point, and very often the idea I had to communicate is not even to be found in the postscript.

When I sat down to write to you, I certainly had no intention of telling you half of what I have written. I simply wanted to let you know that we were going to perform the comedy; but a word leads to a phrase, one parenthesis produces another, which again gives birth to others. There is no reason why this letter should not extend to two hundred volumes, but that would most certainly be too much.

As soon as I pick up my pen there is a buzzing and rustling of wings in my head, as if multitudes of cockchafers had been liberated there. The sound knocks upon the walls of my cranium, turns, descends, and rises with a horrible din: it is the noise of my thoughts which desire to fly away and seek an outlet; they all try to emerge at once; more than one is injured. Sometimes he doorway is so blocked that not one can cross its threshold and reach paper.

That is the way I am made—not a good way, certainly—but still it cannot be helped! The fault is with the gods, not with me, a poor devil who has no lternative. I have no need to claim your indulgence, Silvio; it is granted me n advance, and you are good enough o read to the end my illegible scrawls, nd my dreams without head or tail; however disjointed and absurd they may be, they always interest you, because hey come from me, and, I, bad as I m, still have some value in your eyes.

I can show you that which annoys n ordinary man most: a sincere pride. But a truce to all these fine things, and ince I am writing to you about our lay, I will say a little more about it.

The rehearsal took place to-day; ever in my life was I so agitated, not ecause of the natural embarrassment n reciting in the presence of a number f persons, but for another reason. We were in costume and ready to begin; Theodore was not yet present; a messenger was sent to his room to see what detained him; he sent word that he was just ready and was coming down.

He came; I heard his footsteps in the corridor before he appeared, and yet no one on earth has a lighter tread than Theodore; but the sympathy I feel for him is so strong that I to some extent divine his movements through the walls, and when I realized that he was about to place his hand upon the handle of the door, a trembling seized me, and my heart beat horribly. It seemed to me that some important event in my life was about to be decided, and that the solemn and long-expected moment had arrived.

The door opened and closed again slowly. There was a general cry of admiration. The men clapped, the women became scarlet. Rosette alone turned very pale and leant against the wall, as if a sudden revelation had come to her; she made in the reverse way the same movement that I did. I always suspected her of loving Theodore.

Without a doubt, at that moment she believed as I did that the sham Rosalind was no less than a young and beautiful woman, and the frail house of cards of her hope suddenly collapsed, while mine rose upon its ruins; at least that is what I thought; perhaps I was mistaken, for I was scarcely in the state to make exact observations.

There were, without counting Rosette, three or four pretty women present; they appeared revoltingly ugly. By the side of the sun, the star of their beauty was suddenly eclipsed, and every one asked himself how it was they only seemed passable. Men who previously had esteemed themselves very fortutate to have them for mistresses would now have hardly taken them as servants.

The image which up to that time had only been vaguely outlined in indistinct contours, the adored but vainly pursued phantom, was there before my eyes alive, palpable, no longer in the twilight and mist, but bathed in white light; not in an ineffective disguise, but in real dress; not in the derisive shape of a young man, but with the features of a most charming woman.

I had a feeling of enormous happiness, as if a mountain or two had been removed from my chest. I felt the horror I had of myself vanish, and I was delivered from the boredom of looking upon myself as a monster. I returned to the pastoral opinion of myself, and all the violets of spring blossomed in my heart.

He, or rather she (for I want to forget that I was stupid enough to take her for a man) remained for a moment standing at the door, and as if to allow time for the audience to utter its first exclamation. A bright light illuminated her from head to foot. Her long brown hair, ornamented with rows of big pearls, fell in natural curls upon her beautiful shoulders! Her shoulders and breast were bare, and never have I seen any so beautiful; the most noble marble does not approach that exquisite perfection. How the life can be seen through its shadowy transparence! How white and colored at the same time such flesh is! How such fair and harmonious tints make the most of the transition from the skin to the hair! What ravishing poems there are in the soft undulation of those contours, more supple and velvety than the swan's neck! If there were words adequate to describe what I feel, I would write you a fifty-page description; but languages have been made by bunglers who have never gazed attentively at a woman's breast or back, and not half the indispensable terms exist.

I am decidedly of opinion that I must become a sculptor; for after seeing such beauty, to be unable to reproduce it in one way or another is enough to drive a man mad. I have written twenty sonnets upon those shoulders, but that is not enough. I should like something which I could touch with my finger, and which was exactly like the original. The painter arrives at a more exact appearance, but still it is only an appearance. Sculpture has all the reality a thing completely false can have; it has the multiple aspect, produces a shadow and can be touched. Your sculptured figure only differs from the real in being a little harder and unable to talk: two very slight defects.

Her dress was made of a material which changed color, it was azure in the light and gold in the shadow; a neat buskin enclosed a foot which did not need it to appear too tiny, and scarlet silk stockings clung amorously around her well-turned and seductive legs; her arms were bare to the elbows, and they emerged plump and white from a round cluster of lace with the splendor of burnished silver and a delicacy of contour quite inconceivable; her hands loaded with rings, gently waved a large fan of variegated feathers of strange tints, which looked like a little pocke rainbow.

She advanced into the room, her face slightly tinged with a red which wa not rouge, and every one was enrap ured and excitedly talking as they asked one another if it were possible that this was Theodore de Sérannes, the bold rider, the famous duelist, the determined sportsman, and if they were perfectly certain this was not his twin sister.

Theodore looked as if he had never worn any other costume in his life! He was not the least bit in the world embarrassed in his movements, he walked very well, and was not encumbered by his train; he ogled and played with his fan to perfection. What a fine figure he had! His waist could be spanned by one's fingers! It is wonderful, it is inconceivable! The illusion was as complete as possible; he almost gave the impression of a breast with his fat and bulging chest; and then, too, there was not a hair on his face, and his voice was so soft! Oh, beautiful Rosalind, who would not be your Orlando?

Yes, who would not be Orlando to this Rosalind, even to endure the torments I have suffered? To love as I loved with a monstrous and inadmissible love, which could not be uprooted from the heart; to be condemned to keep the most profound silence, and not to dare to make use of words the most discreet and respectful lover would utter without fear to the most severe and prudish of women; to feel oneself devoured by passions considered mad and inexcusable in the most libertine eyes; what are ordinary passions by the side of that one, shameless in itself, without hope, while its improbable success would be a crime and make one die of shame? To be reduced to a desire for failure, to fear favorable chances and opportunities, and avoid them as another person would seek them, that was my lot.

The deepest discouragement had taken hold upon me; I looked upon myself with horror mingled with surprise and curiosity. The most revolting thing to me was to think that I had never loved before, and that in my case it was the first effervescence of youth, my springtime of love.

This monstrosity in my case took the place of the fresh and shamefaced illusions of that beautiful age. At times when I felt myself most strongly attracted towards Theodore I took refuge in affright in Rosette's arms, although she was distasteful to me; I tried to interpose her between him and myself like a barrier and a shield, and I felt a secret satisfaction in doing so from the thought that she was at least a real woman, and if I no longer loved her, she still loved me enough for the liaison not to degenerate into intrigue and debauchery.

Still I felt in my heart through it all some sort of regret at thus being unfaithful to the idea of my impossible passion; I desired it, and although I was aware that I should never possess the object of my love, I was displeased with myself, and my coldness with Juliette was continued.

The rehearsal was much better than I expected; Theodore in particular was admirable. It was also discovered that I acted very well. It is not that I have the qualities necessary for a good actor. and it would be a great mistake to suppose me capable of taking other parts with the same success; but by a strange chance the words I had to utter so well suited my own state that they seemed to me more like words invented by myself than learned from a book. Memory would have failed me in some places had I not unhesitatingly filled the gap with an improvised phrase. Orlando was myself at least as much as I was Orlando, and it is impossible to find a more marvelous coincidence.

In the scene where Theodore detached the chain from his neck and presented it to me he threw me a glance so gently languishing, so full of promise, and uttered the words with such grace and nobility of phrase, "Brave knight, wear this in memory of me, of a young girl who would give you more if she had more to offer," I was really agitated, and it was only with difficulty that I could continue, "What passion thus weighs upon my tongue and fetters it? I cannot speak to her, and yet she desires to talk with me. O poor Orlando!"

In the third act Rosalind, dressed as a man and in the name of Ganymede, reappears with her cousin Celia, who has changed her name for that of Aliena.

That scene made a disagreeable impression upon me, for I was already so used to the woman's dress, which gave my desires some hope, and which maintained me in a perfidious but seductive error! One uses oneself very quickly to look upon desires as reality upon the faith of the most fugitive appearances, and I became quite gloomy when Theodore reappeared in man's dress, more gloomy than I was before; for joy only serves to emphasize sorrow, the sun only shines to make the horrors of darkness better understood, and the gayety of the white only has for its object the making of all the sadness of the black stand out more clearly.

His dress was the most gallant and coquettish possible, of an elegant and capricious cut, ornamented with ribbons almost in the style of the exquisites at the Court of Louis XIII; a pointed hat of felt with a long feather shaded his beautiful curls, and a Damascus blade peered from beneath his traveling cloak.

Still he wore his manly habits in such a way as to suggest that they had feminine counterparts; they were larger about the hips and fuller at the chest, with somewhat more wavy lines than clothes assume upon a man's body, leaving only slight doubts as to the person's sex.

His manner was half deliberate, half timid, and with infinite art he gave himself the air of being embarrassed in a costume familiar to him, while he had seemed quite at ease in the costume not his own.

My serenity somewhat returned, and I persuaded myself once more that Theodore was a woman. I recovered sufficient sang-froid to suitably continue my part.

Do you know the play? Perhaps not. During the fortnight in which I have done nothing but read and recite it I have learned it entirely by heart, and I can hardly realize that every one is not as familiar with it as I am. It is a common mistake, which I often make, to think that when I am intoxicated the whole of creation is so too and beating the walls; and if I knew Hebrew it is certain I should ask my servant in Hebrew for my dressing gown and slippers, and be very surprised he did not understand me. You shall read it if you please; I shall proceed as if you have read it, and only touch upon the parts which refer to my situation.

Rosalind, walking in the forest with her cousin, is very surprised to find the bushes bearing, instead of mulberries and sloes, madrigals in her praise. It was a strange crop such as fortunately is not usually found upon the hedgerows, for when one is thirsty it is better to find good mulberries on the branches than bed sonnets. She is very anxious to know who has in this way spoiled the bark of the young trees. Celia, who has already met Orlando, tells her, after long entreaty, that the rhymer is none other than the conqueror of Charles the Duke's wrestler.

Soon Orlando himself appears, and Rosalind enters into conversation by asking him the time. That truly is a most simple beginning; nothing in the world could be more commonplace. But have no fear. From that vulgar and ordinary phrase you will see at once arise a number of unexpected conceits, full of flowery and singular comparisons, as from the most fertile land.

After a few lines of sparkling dialogue, in which every word, falling upon the phrase, makes millions of sparks fly right and left like a hammer upon a bar of red-hot iron, Rosalind asks Orlando if by any chance he knows the man who hangs odes upon the hawthorn and elegies upon the briars, and who seems to be attacked daily by a love malady, one she knows perfectly well how to cure. Orlando confesses that he is the man so tortured by love, and since he has boasted of several prescriptions to cure the malady, will he be good enough to tell him one. "You a lover?" Rosalind replies. "You have none of the symptoms by which a lover is recognized; you have neither thin cheeks nor black-rimmed eyes; your stockings do not hang down about your heels, your sleeves are not unbuttoned, and the bow of your shoes is tied with much grace; if you are in love with any one it is certainly with your own person and you have no use for my remedies."

It was not without real emotion that I gave the reply in these words:

"Handsome young fellow, I would like to be able to make you believe I love you."

This strange and unexpected reply, which is not brought about by anything, and which seemed to have been written expressly for me as if by the poet's prescience, had a great effect upon me when I uttered it to Theodore, whose divine lips were still slightly distended by the ironical expression of the phrase he had just uttered, while his eyes smiled with inexpressible sweetness, and a clear ray of kindness gilded the upper part of his young and beautiful face.

"I believe it? It is easy enough to persuade the woman who loves you, and yet she will not readily admit she loves you, and that is one of the subjects on which women always give their conscience the lie; but in all sincerity are you the person who fastened to the bushes all those beautiful eulogies of Rosalind, and why should you actually need a remedy for your folly?"

When she is quite certain that it is he, Orlando, and no other, who has written these admirable verses which walk upon so many feet, beautiful Rosalind consents to tell him her remedy. This is what it comprises: she is to pretend to be the sufferer's beloved, and he is obliged to make love to her as to his real mistress, and to disgust him of his passion she gives way to the most extravagant caprices; sometimes she weeps, sometimes she laughs; one day she receives him kindly, another badly; she scratches him and spits in his face; she is not for a moment like her real self; she is simpering, flighty, prudish, and languorous in turn, and all the outrageous fancies, boredom, hysterics, and blue devils can produce in the empty head of a mistress the poor fellow has to endure. An imp, monkey, and lawyer united would not have invented more spite. This miraculous treatment did not fail to produce its result; the lovesick man fell from excess of love into a state of madness, which caused him to acquire a horror of the whole world, and he ought to have ended his days in a monastic retreat—a not very satisfactory though likely conclusion.

Orlando, as can well be believed, did not care to return to health by such means; but Rosalind insisted and wished to undertake the cure. She used this phrase, "I would cure you if you would only consent to call me Rosalind and visit me every day in my hut," with such marked and obvious intent and such a strange glance, that it was impossible not to attach to it a wider meaning than the mere words conveyed, and not to see in it an indirect warning against declaring my real sentiments. When Orlando replied, "Willingly, amiable young man," she gave her answer in a still more significant tone, "No, no, you must call me Rosalind."

Perhaps I was mistaken, and thought I saw something which did not really exist; but it seemed to me that Theodore had perceived my love, although certainly I had never betrayed it by a single word. It was quite impossible for a woman as clever as she must be, and who had seen as much life, not to have understood what was passing in my soul. Without words my eyes and my trouble were sufficient evidence, and the veil of ardent friendship which I had thrown over my love was not so impenetrable but that an attentive and interested observer could easily see through it. The most innocent and unsophisticated maiden would not have been deceived for a moment.

Some important reason unknown to me without a doubt compelled this cursed disguise, the cause of all my torment. Without it everything would have been easy; I should have been able to give way with sweet security to the most varied amorous reveries, and take in my own the little white and silky hand of my divinity without a shudder of horror, and without recoiling twenty paces, as if I had touched a red-hot iron or felt the talons of the real Beelzebub.

Instead of despairing and acting like a real maniac, of beating my breast with remorse and bewailing, I should have told myself with a satisfied conscience, "I am in love"—a phrase as agreeable to utter in the morning with one's head upon a soft pillow in a warm bed as any other imaginable phrase of three words, except the one "I have money."

After getting up I could have taken up a position in front of my mirror and looked at myself with a sort of respect, and I should have been moved by my own poetic pallor as I arranged my hair. Then I should have breakfasted with gravity and contrition in order to feed this dear body, this precious box of passion.

After breakfast I should have interwoven a few rhymes into a sonnet in honor of my princess. After the son had been finished and transcribed upon glazed and perfumed paper I should have experienced the feeling that I was a hundred cubits high, and must stoop lest my head should reach up into the sky and become entangled in the clouds (a wise precaution), and I should have to retail my new production to all my friends, to all my enemies, then to children at the breast and to their nurses, then to horses and donkeys, and finally to walls and trees, to find out the opinion of creation upon my latest effort.

At receptions I should have adopted a doctorial tone with the women, and sustained discussions on sentiment in grave and measured tones, like a man who knew much more than he cared to say about the particular subject, and who had not obtained his knowledge from books; such a pose never fails to produce a marvelous effect and fainting fits among the women present, who cease their idle chatter.

I could have led the happiest life possible—stepped on a pet dog's tail without making its mistress cry out, overturned stands of old china, and at meals eaten the choice bits without leaving them for the rest of the company; it would all have been excusable on the score of a lover's well-known distraction; and as they saw me swallow everything with a bewildered expression people would have said, "Poor fellow."

Then with a dreamy and mournful manner how untidy I might have been, how I could have traversed the avenues in the park sometimes with huge strides, sometimes with a mincing step, like a man whose reason had completely departed!

But the gods ordered otherwise.

I am enamored of a beauty in doublet and boots, of a proud woman who disdains the habits of her sex, and one who leaves me at times in a sea of perplexity; her features and body are a woman's, but her mind is undoubtedly a man's.

My beloved is skillful with the foils; she has fought several duels and killed or wounded three or four persons; she is daring on horseback, and is like an old gamekeeper when out shooting. They are strange qualities for a sweetheart, but I am the only person to whom such a thing would happen.

I laugh, but certainly without reason, for I have never suffered so much, and the last two months have seemed two years, or rather two centuries. There has been in my head an ebb and flow of uncertainty enough to stupefy the strongest mind; I have been so violently agitated and worried in every way, and I have suffered such furious outbursts, such mournful debility, such extravagant hopes and such profound despair, that I do not know how I have survived it all. This idea has occupied and filled my mind so that I have been astonished; it was not visible through my body like a candle in a lantern, and I have been in a state of mortal dread lest any one discovered the object of my mad affection. Moreover, Rosette being the person who was most interested in overlooking the movements of my heart, has not appeared to notice anything; I believe she has been too much engaged in loving Theodore to pay any attention to my cooling affection for her; or else I am a past master in dissimulation, and I am not fatuous enough to believe that. Theodore has not shown that he has the least suspicion of the state of my soul, and he has always spoken to me in a familiar and friendly way, as a well-bred fellow talks to a friend of the same age, but nothing more. His conversation with me has turned upon all sorts of subjects—art, poetry, and the like; but there has been nothing confidential or definite in it in relation to either of us.

Perhaps the motives for his disguise no longer exist and he will soon resume his proper attire. I am quite ignorant on the subject. Still Rosalind uttered certain words with particular inflections, and in a very marked fashion accentuated all the passages in the part which had an ambiguous significance or could be construed into ambiguity.

In the scene of the meeting, from the moment she reproaches Orlando for not arriving two hours earlier like a real lover, but being two hours late, to the grievous sigh which, frightened at the depth of her passion, she utters as she throws herself into Aliena's arms, "O cousin! cousin! my pretty little cousin! if you knew how deeply I am immersed in the abyss of love!" she displayed miraculous talent. It was a mixture of tenderness, of melancholy and irresistible love; her voice trembled with emotion, and behind the laugh one felt that the most violent love was ready to explode; add to that the piquancy and strangeness of the transposition and the novelty in seeing a young man making love to his mistress, whom he takes for a man and who appears to be one.

Expressions which would have appeared ordinary and commonplace in other circumstances now assumed particular prominence, and all the lover's comparisons and protestations which took place upon the stage seemed to be recoined with a fresh stamp; besides, had the thoughts, instead of being as charming and choice as they were, been worn threadbare, the way in which they were uttered would have imbued them with the most marvelous cleverness and best possible taste.

I have forgotten to mention that Rosette, after declining the part of Rosalind, had good-naturedly taken the small part of Phebe. Phebe is a shepherdess of the forest of the Ardennes, devoutly adored by the shepherd Sylvius, whom she cannot endure and treats with the utmost harshness. Phebe is as cold as the moon; she has a heart of snow which does not melt at the fire of the most ardent sighs, while its icy covering increases more and more in thickness and becomes as hard as the diamond; but as soon as she sees Rosalind in the clothes of the handsome page Ganymede the ice melts into tears and the diamond becomes softer than wax. The proud Phebe who laughed at love is herself in love; now she suffers the torments she made others endure. Her pride evaporates, she makes all the advances, and she sends by poor Sylvius to Rosalind an ardent letter which contains the confession of her passion in the most humble and suppliant terms. Rosalind, touched with pity for Sylvius, and having the most excellent reasons for not reciprocating Phebe's love, makes her endure the harshest of treatment and jeers at her with unparalleled cruelty and fury. Phebe, however, prefers this treatment to the most passionate and delicate madrigals of her unhappy shepherd; she follows the beautiful unknown everywhere, and the sweetest admission she can obtain by her importunity is the promise that if ever he marries a woman she shall cerainly be the one. Meanwhile he instructs her to treat Sylvius kindly, and not to cherish too pleasant hopes.

Rosette plays her part with sorrowful and caressing grace in a voice the sad and resigned tones of which touch the heart; and when Rosalind says to her, "I would love you if I could," the tears stand in her eyes and she can hardly keep them back, for the story of Phebe is her own story just as Orlando's is mine, with the difference that there is a happy ending for Orlando, while Phebe, deceived in her love, is deprived of the charming ideal she wishes to embrace and is destined to marry Sylvius. Life is thus ordered, one person's happiness is of necessity another's sorrow. It makes me very happy to think that Theodore is a woman; it is very unfortunate for Rosette that Theodore is not a man, and she is now involved in the amorous impossibilities from which I have escaped.

At the end of the play Rosalind leaves off her disguise as the page Ganymede, and in the garments of her own sex is recognized by the Duke as his daughter and by Orlando as his mistress. The god Hymen arrives; three weddings take place. Orlando marries Rosalind, Phebe weds Sylvius, and Touchstone the clown espouses the naïve Audrey. Then comes the epilogue and the curtain falls.

The play occupied and extremely interested us all. There was to some extent a play within a play, a drama, invisible and unknown to the other spectators, which we acted for ourselves alone, and which in symbolical words summed up our whole lives and expressed our most secret desires. Without Rosalind's strange expedient I should have been more suffering than ever, without even a hope of a future cure, and I should have continued to wander sadly through the oblique paths of the dark forest.

Still I have only a moral certainty; I lack proof, and I can remain no longer in this state of uncertainty; I must speak to Theodore in a more definite fashion. I have approached him twenty times with a phrase ready, without being able to utter it; I dare not. I have many opportunities to talk to him privately in the park, in my room, or in his chamber, for he comes to see me and I go to see him, but I let them pass without making use of them, although a moment afterwards I have a feeling of terrible regret and am greatly enraged with myself. I open my mouth, and unwittingly other words take the place of those I wish to utter; instead of declaring my love I talk of the rain and the fine weather or some other similar stupidity. But the season will soon be over, and people will go back to the city. The opportunities I have here will not occur elsewhere; we shall perhaps lose sight of one another, and streams will without a doubt bear us away in opposite directions.

The liberty of the country is so charming and convenient! Even the trees in the autumn with their dropping leaves offer delightful shades to the reveries of a newborn love! It is difficult to resist the environment of beautiful nature—the birds with their languorous songs, the flowers with their intoxicating perfumes, and the slopes of the hills with their golden and silky verdure! Solitude inspires a thousand voluptuous thoughts which the bustle of the world will disperse or scatter here and there, and the instinctive movement of two beings who can hear their hearts beat in the silence of a deserted country, is to entwine their arms more closely and lean one upon the other as if they are the only two living persons left in the world.

I went for a walk this morning; the weather was warm and damp, and there was no sign of blue in the sky; yet it was neither somber nor threatening. Two or three tones of pearl-gray harmoniously blended completely covered the heavens, and over this background slowly passed woolly clouds like great pieces of cotton; they were driven by a gentle breeze hardly strong enough to move the tops of the aspens; clouds of mist arose between the chestnuts and indicated the course of the river.

The horizon was so enveloped in mist that it was hardly possible to see the exact point where the sky began and the earth ended. Through this curtain the willows looked more like the specters of trees than real trees; the outlines of the hills were more like the undulations of a cloud bank than solid earth.

As I walked I thought that the autumn had also come for me, and that a brilliant summer had passed never to return; the tree of my soul was perhaps still more leafless than the trees in the forest; there hardly remained on its loftiest branch one little green leaf quivering with sorrow at the loss of its fellows.

Remain upon the tree, little leaf of the color of hope; cling to the branch with all the strength of nerves and fibers; be not frightened by the whistling of the wind, good little leaf! For when you have left me, who will be able to distinguish whether I am a living or a dead tree, and what will prevent the woodman from felling me with his ax and making my branches into fagots? It is not yet time for the trees to shed their leaves, and the sun can still dissipate the surrounding fog.

The sight of the dying season made a great impression upon me. I thought that time was fleeting quickly, and that I might die without pressing my ideal to my heart.

On going indoors I made a resolution. As I could not make up my mind to speak I wrote my destiny upon a sheet of paper. It is perhaps ridiculous to write to a person who lives in the same house, whom one can see every day at any hour; but I was not in a state to consider its ridiculousness.

I sealed my letter not without trembling and changing color; then selecting a moment when Theodore had gone out, I placed it on the middle of the table and fled in as much agitation as if I had committed the most disgraceful action possible.

Chapter XII

INFINITE DREAMS

I promised you the rest of my adventures; but really I am so lazy where the writing of letters is concerned, that I must love you as the apple of mine eye and know you to be more curious than Eve or Psyche, to settle down at a table with a pile of white paper which has to be made black, and an ink bottle deeper than the sea, every drop from which ought to turn into thoughts, or at least something like them, without suddenly resolving to mount and cover at full speed the eighty enormous leagues which separate us to recount to you with my own voice what I am about to write, so that I shall not be frightened by its bulk.

To think that eighty leagues separate me from the person I love best in the whole world! I have a great mind to tear up the letter and saddle my horse. But it is out of the question, for dressed as I am I could not approach you and resume the familiar life we led together when we were naïve and innocent little girls. If ever I resume my skirts it will assuredly be with that object.

I left off, I think, at my departure from the inn where I spent such a droll night and where my virtue was almost shipwrecked on leaving the harbor. We all set off together in the same direction. My companions were loud in their praises of my horse, which was well-bred and fast; that raised me considerably in their estimation, and they added to my own merit that of my steed. They were, however, afraid my mount was too frisky and mettlesome for me. I told them they could allay their fears, and to show them there was no danger I made several curvets, jumped a high hedge, and had a gallop.

The party vainly endeavored to follow me. I drew rein when I had gone far enough, and came back to meet them at full speed; when I was close to them I reined up sharp and stopped short.

From esteem they passed into a state of profound respect for me. They did not suspect that a young student who had recently left the university was so good a horseman. Their discovery had more effect than if they recognized in me all the theological and cardinal virtues. Instead of treating me like a big boy they spoke to me in a tone of obsequious familiarity which gave me great pleasure.

When I doffed my female attire I did not also discard my pride. Being no longer a woman, I wished to be quite a man, and was not content with having the external appearance of one. I decided to attain the success as a cavalier I could no longer attain as a woman. My greatest anxiety was to know how to manage to have sufficient courage; for courage and skill in bodily exercises are the means by which a man most easily lays the foundation of a reputation. I am not timid for a woman, and I have not that imbecile faint-heartedness found in so many; but that is a long step from the careless and ferocious brutality which is man's glory, and my intention was to become a little bully, a swaggerer, so as to put myself upon a sound footing in society and enjoy all the advantages of my metamorphosis.

Soon I discovered that nothing was easier, and that the recipe was a very simple one.

I will not narrate, as the custom of travelers is, that I covered so many leagues on such a day, that I went to this or that place, that the roast I had at the "White Horse" or the "Iron Cross" was underdone or burnt, that the wine was sour, and will omit all such important details which should be preserved for posterity; for on this occasion posterity must be disappointed. You must resign yourself to remaining ignorant of the number of courses of which my dinner consisted, and also of how I slept during the night. Nor will I give you an exact description of the different countries, the wheat fields, forests, various cultivated lands and hills with hamlets on their slopes which passed before my eyes in succession. That is easy to imagine: take a little land, plant a few trees and shrubs, daub behind them a little bit of gray or pale blue sky, and you will have a very good idea of the changing background to our cavalcade. If in my first letter I entered into a few details of this nature excuse me, and I will not again fall into the same error. As I had never gone out, the slightest thing seemed to me of enormous importance.

One of the horsemen, my bedfellow, was seized with quite a passion for me, and rode by my side all the time.

With the exception that I would not have liked him for a lover, even had he brought me the most beautiful ring in the world, he was not otherwise displeasing to me; he was well-read, and was not lacking in cleverness or good-humor. Only when he spoke of women he did so in a tone of contempt and irony for which I would have gladly torn the two eyes from his head, the more so as there was, beneath his exaggeration, in what he said many cruel truths, the justice of which my period of disguise had made me recognize.

He invited me in so pressing a way and so often to come and visit with him one of his sisters, a widow now at the end of her mourning, who was living in an old mansion with an aunt, that I could not refuse. I raised a few objections for form's sake, for really it was a matter of no consequence whether I went there or elsewhere, and I could just as well attain my object in that way as in any other; and as he told me that I should annoy him very much if I did not spare him at least a fortnight. I replied that I was agreeable, and the matter was arranged.

At a fork in the road my comrade, pointing to the right, said to me, "That is our way." The rest of the party shook hands and went in the other direction.

After a few hours' journey we reached our destination.

A broad moat which was full of tufts of grass instead of water separated the high road from the park; the facing was of hewn stone, and in the angles stood gigantic artichokes and iron thistles which seemed to have sprung up like natural plants between the disjointed blocks of the wall. A little single-arch bridge crossed the moat and provided access to the gate.

A lofty avenue of elms trimmed in the old style first came into view, and after walking some distance along it we emerged into an open space.

The trees seemed out of date rather than old; they gave the impression that they had wigs and were powdered with white; there had only been left a little tuft of foliage at the summit; all the rest was carefully lopped, so that they looked like enormous plumes planted at intervals.

After crossing the open space, which was covered with fine grass and had been carefully rolled, it was still necessary to pass beneath a curious arch of foliage. A large flower garden in the French style stretched before the château; all the divisions were traced with bushes and holly with the most rigid symmetry; it looked more like a carpet than a garden. Great flowers in ball dress with majestic bearing and serene faces, like duchesses preparing to dance a minuet, made a slight inclination of the head as we passed. Others, apparently less polite, held themselves stiff and motionless like tapestry dowagers. Shrubs in every possible shape, if we except their natural one, round, square, pointed, triangular, seemed to walk in procession along the great avenue, and lead us by the hand to the bottom of the steps.

A few turrets, half-absorbed in more recent building, broke the line of the building. The windows of the middle block all opened on to a balcony ornamented with a balustrade of wrought iron of great richness, and the others were surrounded by stone ledges with carved figures and knots.

Four or five great dogs ran barking and jumping to meet us. They gamboled around the horses and jumped up in front of them; they seemed particularly glad to see my companion's horse, one they had probably often followed and visited in the stable.

At all this noise a servant, half groom, half laborer, appeared, took our steeds by their bridle and led them away. I had seen no person yet, save a little peasant girl, as wild and startled as a doe, who fled at our approach and crouched in a trench, although we called her several times and did all we could to reassure her.

No one appeared at the windows; it seemed as if the château were either uninhabited or else the home of spirits; for not the slightest sound could be heard from without.

We were beginning to ascend the steps, clanking our spurs, for our legs were weary, when we heard from within the sound of doors opening and closing as if some one was hastening to meet us.

A young woman appeared upon the top of the steps, traversed the space which separated her from my companion at a bound, and fell upon his neck. He kissed her most affectionately, and putting his arm around her waist, almost lifted her up and carried her like that to the top.

"Do you know you are very loving and gallant for a brother, Alcibiades? It is not quite unnecessary for me to tell you that he is my brother, is it, sir?" the young woman said, turning to me.

My reply was to the effect that it was possible to be mistaken, and that it was to some extent a misfortune to be her brother and thus be excluded from the number of her lovers; that I, personally, in his place should become at the same time the happiest and most unhappy knight on earth. This made her smile sweetly.

While talking like this we entered a low hall, the walls of which were decorated with a Flemish tapestry.

"Alcibiades, I am going to tell your aunt of your arrival."

"Oh, that is not a very urgent matter, sister; let us sit down first and have a chat. Allow me to present to you a gentleman, Theodore de Sérannes, who will stay here a little while. I have no need to ask you to give him a hearty welcome; he is his own recommendation" (I am repeating his words; do not impetuously accuse me of fatuity).

The beauty made a slight motion of the head as if to assent, and we talked of other things.

While joining in the conversation I looked at her carefully and examined her more attentively than I had done before.

She was about twenty-three or four, and her mourning suited her to perfection; to tell the truth, she did not seem at all sorrowful or downcast. I do not know whether she had shed many tears for her departed spouse; if she had done so there was no sign of them, and the pretty cambric handkerchief she held in her hand was as dry as possible.

Her eyes were not red, on the contrary they were the most clear and brilliant in the world, and it was waste of time to look upon her cheeks for the groove down which the tears had flowed; the only things visible there were two little dimples fashioned by her habit of smiling, and for a widow it must be admitted that one could very frequently see her teeth; it certainly was not a disagreeable sight, for they were pretty and even. I esteemed her first of all for not feeling herself obliged, because her husband had died, to darken her eyes and make her nose violet. I also looked upon it as good taste for her not to assume some little sorrowful mannerism, and to speak naturally in her cheery and sonorous voice, without drawling her words or intersecting her phrases by virtuous sighs.

All that appeared to me to be in a very good taste. I looked upon her as a clever woman, and I was quite correct in my estimate.

She was well made, with aristocratic feet and hands; her black dress was arranged as coquettishly as possible, and so gayly that the mournfulness of the color completely disappeared, and she might have gone to a ball as she was without appearing out of place. If ever I marry and am left a widow I shall ask her for a pattern of her dress, for it suited her to perfection.

After a chat we went upstairs to see the aunt.

We found her sitting in a large easy-chair, with her feet upon a footstool, and by her side an old dog, sullen and blind, which lifted his black head at our approach and received us with an unfriendly growl.

I have never gazed upon an old woman without a feeling of horror. My mother died quite young; without a doubt if I had seen her slowly age and her features gradually lose their shape by imperceptible stages, I should have become accustomed to the change. In my youth I was surrounded by young and laughing faces only, so that I retained an unbearable antipathy for old folk. Therefore I shuddered when the beautiful widow touched with her pure red lips the dowager's yellow forehead.

Still the old lady had retained a few simple and majestic traces of her former beauty, which prevented her from falling into that ugliness of the baked-apple order, which is the fate of women who have only been pretty or fresh colored. Her eyes, though terminating in wrinkles at their corners and covered by large, loose lids, had retained a few sparks of their former fire, and it was obvious that in the reign of another king they had launched dazzling and passionate glances. Her small, slender nose, slightly arched like the beak of a bird of prey, gave to her profile an appearance of severe grandeur, which tempered the indulgent smile of her lips, still carmine tinted according to the fashion of the last century.

Her costume was old-fashioned without being ridiculous, and harmonized perfectly with her face. She had as a head-dress a mob cap with a little lace; her long, slender hands, which seemed once to have been very beautiful, were in mittens, while a dark dress embroidered with flowers, a black shawl, and an apron completed her attire.

Old ladies should always dress like that, and thus respect their approaching death by not adorning themselves with feathers, garlands of flowers, ribbons of tender colors, and the thousand trinkets which only suit extreme youth. It is in vain for them to make advances to life, for life is not willing.

The old lady received us with that ease and exquisite politeness which is the privilege of members of the old nobility, and grows rarer day by day like so many other secrets, and spoke in a voice which, although broken and tremulous, was still very sweet.

I seemed to please her greatly, and she looked at me long and attentively with a very tender expression. A tear formed in the corner of her eye and trickled slowly down one of her wrinkles till it disappeared. She begged me to excuse her and told me that I was very much like her son who had been killed in battle.

All the time I stayed at the château, because of this likeness, real or imaginary, I was treated by the old lady with extraordinary and maternal kindness. I found this more charming than I believed possible, for the greatest kindness as a rule aged persons can do me is to never speak and to depart when I arrive.

I shall not tell you in detail and day by day what I did at R. If I have been a little prolix at the beginning, and have sketched with some care the two or three persons, it is because strange though quite natural things have happened to me there, events which I ought to have anticipated when I assumed male attire.

My natural thoughtlessness led me into an imprudence which I bitterly repent, for it has brought a trouble to a good and beautiful soul which I cannot allay without making known who I am and seriously compromising myself.

To play the part of a man perfectly and amuse myself, I found nothing better to do than to make love to my friend's sister. It seemed to me very funny to go down on all fours when she dropped her glove and restore it to her with a pronounced obeisance, to lean over the back of her chair with a languorous air and to pour into her ear a thousand and one of the most charming madrigals. When she wished to go from one room to the other I gracefully offered her my arm; if she mounted her horse I held the stirrup; and when walking I was always at her side. In the evening I read to her or sang with her; in short I played the part of a suitor with scrupulous exactness.

I imitated all the gestures I had seen lovers make, much to my own amusement, for alone in my chamber I laughed like a madman when I thought of all the impertinences I had uttered in the most serious tone in the world.

Alcibiades and the old Marquis appeared to view the intimacy with pleasure and left us very often together. I sometimes regretted I was not really a man, to profit better by the opportunity; if I had been my suit would have been successful, for the charming widow seemed to have entirely forgotten her late husband, or else if she remembered him she would have gladly been unfaithful to his memory.

After beginning in this fashion I could scarcely draw back with honor, and it was very difficult to conduct a retreat with arms and baggage. I could, however, refrain from overstepping a certain mark and restrict my amiability to words alone. I hoped in this way to reach the end of the month I was to spend at R. and go away promising to return. I thought that on my departure the beauty would console herself, and not seeing me again would soon forget me.

But in my sport I had awakened a serious passion, for matters turned out differently, and that brings to mind the well-known truism that it is never advisable to play with fire or love.

Before seeing me Rosette knew nothing of love. Married very young to a man much older than herself, she only had a sort of filial affection for him; without a doubt she had been courted, but, extraordinary though it may seem, she had never had a lover; either the gallants who had made love to her were not very seductive, or more likely her hour had not yet come. The country suitors were not to her liking, and her virtue had not been sorely tried to resist their assaults. Besides, her natural gayety and humor were a sufficient defence against love, that soft passion which has such a hold upon dreamers and the sorrowful; the idea her old Tithonus had been able to give her of love must have been such a poor one that she was not greatly tempted to try again, and she enjoyed the pleasure of being a widow at so early an age and of still having so many years of beauty before her.

But at my arrival all that changed. I at first thought that if I had maintained with her a cold and exact politeness she would not have paid any attention to me; but I was obliged to admit that I was mistaken.

Rosette's destiny is to love only once in her life, an impossible love; she must realize it and she will do so.

I have been loved, Graciosa! It is a sweet thing, though it is only by a woman, and in an irregular affection like that there is something painful which is not found in another. Oh, it is a very sweet thing! When one wakes in the night, and sits up to say, "Some one is thinking or dreaming of me; some one is concerned in my life; a movement of my eyes or mouth brings joy or sorrow to another creature; a word I have dropped by chance is gathered with care, commented upon, and examined for hours together; I am the star by which an anxious lover steers; my eyes are a sky, my mouth a paradise more desired than the real one; were I to die, a soft rain of tears would warm my ashes, my grave would be more adorned with flowers than a bridal; if I were in danger some one would rush between the point of the sword and my breast in sacrifice for me!" It is beautiful; and I do not know anything one can desire more in the world.

This thought gave me a pleasure with which I reproached myself, for after all I had nothing to give, and I was in the position of the poor person accepting presents from a rich and generous friend, without the hope of ever being able to make any return. It charmed me to be so adored, and at times I accepted the situation with strange complaisance. Through hearing every one call me "Sir" and treat me as if I were a man, I insensibly forgot I was a woman; my disguise seemed to me my natural attire, and I did not recollect wearing any other.

Many men are more womanly than I am. I have only a woman's throat, a few curved lines, and delicate hands; the skirt is around my thighs, not in my mind. It often happens that the sex of the soul is not that of the body, and it is a contradiction which cannot fail to produce great disorder. If, for example, I had never taken my apparently foolish but in reality very wise resolution to renounce the attire of a sex which is only materially mine by chance, I should have been very unhappy. I love horses, fencing, violent exercises, and I am delighted to run and climb like a boy; it bores me to sit still with my feet close together and my elbows at my sides, to modestly drop my eyes, to talk in a soft, flute-like, and honeyed voice, and to pass a bit of cotton ten million times through the holes in a piece of cloth; I do not care for obedience the least bit in the world, and the word I use most often is "I want." Beneath my smooth forehead and silky hair strong and virile thoughts are at work; all the precious trifles which usually seduce women have ever had but little charm for me, and, like Achilles when disguised as a girl, I would willingly discard the mirror for a sword. The only thing about women which pleases me is their beauty; in spite of its inconvenient results, I would not readily renounce my form, badly though it is suited to the mind it envelops.

There was something new and piquant in an intrigue of the sort, and I should have been greatly amused by it, if it had not been taken seriously by poor Rosette. She set herself to love me with admirable *naïveté* and conscientiousness, and all the strength of her good and beautiful soul, with the love men do not understand and have only a dim idea, delicately and ardently, just as I should desire to be loved, and as I should love if I met the reality of my dream. What a beautiful lost treasure; what white, transparent pearls, such as the divers could never bring up from the depths of the ocean! What fragrant breaths, what sweet sighs were dispersed in the air, which might have been gathered by pure and loving lips!

This love might have made a young man so happy! So many unhappy men, handsome, charming, and wealthy, full of courage and intellect, have vainly worshiped on bended knees insensible and dejected idols! So many good and tender souls have in despair thrown themselves into the arms of courage and intellect, have vainly worshiped on bended sepulchers, though they would have been saved from debauchery and death by a sincere love!

What a strange thing is human destiny! What a great jester is chance!

That for which so many others had ardently longed came to me, to the person who did not and could not desire it. A capricious young girl has a fancy to travel dressed as a man to find out a little about her future lovers; she sleeps at an inn with a worthy brother who takes her to his sister, and the latter has nothing better to do than to fall in love like a cat or a dove. It is quite evident that if I had been a young man, and her love had been of advantage to me, it would have been quite different and the lady would have had a horror of me. Fortune is very fond of giving slippers to those who have wooden legs, and gloves to those who are without hands; the legacy which would have enabled a person to live in comfort usually comes to them on the day of their death.

I went sometimes, though not as often as she would have liked, to see Rosette in her chamber; although she usually received after she was up, that rule was waived in my favor. Many other favors would also have been granted me, had I wished; but the most beautiful girl can only give what she has, and how could I tell poor Rosette.

She gave me her little hand to kiss; I confess I did not kiss it without some pleasure, for it was very soft, white, exquisitely perfumed, and made tender by its slight moisture; I felt it tremble and contract under my lips, the pressure of which I maliciously prolonged. Then Rosette, with a suppliant air, turned to me her almond eyes, full of passion and inundated with a humid and transparent light, before dropping back upon the pillow her pretty head, which she had slightly raised to receive me. I saw beneath the clothes her throat heave and a tremor run through the whole of her body. Truly any one who was in a position to dare might have ventured far, and would certainly have met no opposition to his temerity, and then several chapters of the story would have had to be omitted.

I stayed there for an hour or two with her, without letting go her hand, which was upon the coverlet; we had charming and never-ending talks, for although Rosette was greatly concerned with her love, she believed herself too certain of success not to retain almost all her liberty and gayety of mind. From time to time her passion threw upon her gayety a transparent veil of sweet melancholy which rendered her still more piquant.

Actually, it would have been an unheard-of thing for a young fellow, as I appeared to be, not to consider himself very fortunate and take advantage of his good fortune to the utmost. Rosette was not used to harsh treatment and being unaware of my position, she reckoned upon the effect of her own charms and my youth, even though my love was not hers.

But as this situation began to be prolonged beyond its natural limits she became uneasy, and I had a difficulty, even with an increase of my flattering phrases and beautiful protestations, to restore her former confidence. Two things astonished her in me, and she noticed in my conduct contradictions she could not reconcile—the warmth of my words and the coldness of my actions.

You know better than any one, my dear Graciosa, that my friendship has all the characteristics of a passion; it is sudden, ardent, and exclusive, even to jealousy, and I had for Rosette a friendship almost equal to my friendship for you. It was possible to be mistaken. Rosette was all the more deceived because the clothes I wore hardly allowed her to have any other idea.

As I have not yet loved a man, the excess of my affection is to some extent poured out in my friendship with young girls and women; I put into it the same zeal and exaltation I display in everything I undertake, for it is impossible for me to be moderate in anything, especially when it concerns the heart. There are in my eyes two classes of people, those I love and those I hate; other persons are to me as if they never existed, and I would ride my horse over them as if they were a high road; they do not differ in my mind from paths and rails.

I am naturally expansive, and I have most caressing ways. Sometimes, forgetting the import such demonstrations had, while walking with Rosette I passed my arm around her body, as I used to do when you and I walked together along the lonely walk at the end of my uncle's garden; or else, leaning over the back of her chair as she was engaged upon her embroidery, I rolled around my fingers the downy hair upon her round, plump neck, or polished with the back of my hand the beautiful tresses fastened by her comb and added to their luster, or else I brought into play some other of the pretty ways with which you know it is usual for me to favor my dear friends.

She took care not to attribute these caresses to simple friendship. Friendship, as it is usually understood, does not go so far; but seeing I went no further she was inwardly surprised and did not know what to think; she came to the conclusion that it was timidity on my part, arising from my extreme youth and inexperience in love affairs, and that she must encourage me by all sorts of advances and kindness.

Consequently she took care to give me plenty of opportunities for *tête-à-têtes* in suitable places in order to embolden me by their solitude, freedom from noise and interruption; she made me take several walks in the great woods, to try whether the voluptuous reverie and amorous desires inspired in tender souls by the leafy and inviting shade of the forest could not be turned to her advantage.

One day, after making me wander for a long while through a picturesque park which extended far behind the château, and which except the part near the house was quite strange to me, she led me by a little winding path bordered with elders and nut trees to a rustic house, a sort of charcoal-burner's hut, built of round pieces of wood placed crossways, with a thatched roof, and a door roughly made of five or six bits of wood roughhewn, the crevices of which were filled with moss and wild plants; at the side, between the green roots of the mighty ashes with their silver bark, and black patches here and there, a large spring flowed and a few steps further on fell down two marble steps into a pool full of emerald-green watercress. At the spots which were free from foliage a fine sand, white as snow, was visible; this water was as transparent as crystal and cold as ice; springing from the earth, and never being in contact with the tiniest ray of sunlight in these impenetrable shades, there was no opportunity for it to be stirred up or warmed. In spite of their crudity I love spring waters, and seeing this one was so limpid, I could not resist a desire to drink; I leant down, and several times drank from the hollow of my hand, having no other vessel at my disposal.

Rosette also expressed a desire to drink to quench her thirst, and begged me to procure her a few drops, not daring, so she said, to lean down far enough to reach the water herself. I plunged my two hands, clasped together as closely as possible, into the clear stream, lifted them like a cup to Rosette's lips, and held them there till she had exhausted the water they held, which did not take long, for there was but little after it had trickled through my fingers, tightly though they were clasped; we made a pretty group, and would that a sculptor had been present to make a sketch.

When she had nearly finished, having my hand near her lips, she could not help kissing it, in such a way, however, that I might think it was an inhalation to extract the last drop of water from my palms; but I was not deceived, and the charming blush which suddenly spread over her face betrayed her.

She took my arm again and we set off towards the hut. The beauty walked as close to me as possible, and leant over as we talked, so that her throat rested entirely upon my sleeve: an extremely clever position it was for her to assume, and one capable of disturbing many others besides myself; I could perfectly feel her firm and pure throat and gentle warmth; besides I could notice a hurried undulation which, whether real or affected, was none the less flattering and attractive.

We arrived in this fashion at the door of the hut, which I pushed open with my foot. I did not certainly expect the sight which presented itself to my eyes. I thought the hut would be carpeted with rushes, having the ground for its floor and a few stools to rest upon. Not at all.

It was a boudoir, furnished with every imaginable elegance. The bottom of the doors and the mirrors represented the most gallant scenes from the metamorphoses of Ovid: Salmacis and Hermaphrodite, Venus and Adonis, Apollo and Daphne, and other love scenes from ancient mythology; the piers were made of roses, most delicately carved, and little marguerites, only the hearts of which were gilded and the leaves silvered. A silver edging bordered all the furniture and relieved a color scheme of the softest blue it is possible to imagine, and at the same time one marvelously adapted to make the whiteness and glory of the skin stand out; a thousand charming curiosities loaded the mantelshelf, the tables and whatnots, and there was a regal luxury in the long chairs and sofas which was sufficient evidence that this retreat was not destined for austere occupations, and that one would not be uncomfortable there.

A beautiful marble clock standing upon a richly encrusted pedestal faced a large Venetian mirror, in which it was reflected with strange and brilliant effect. Besides it had stopped, as if the marking of the hours was a superfluity in a place destined to forget them.

I told Rosette that this refined luxury delighted me, that I considered it very good taste to conceal the greatest refinement under an appearance of simplicity, and that I approved very strongly of a woman wearing embroidered skirts and lace-trimmed chemises beneath a simple linen overall; it was a delicate attention to the lover she had or would have for which he could not be too grateful, for surely it was better to put a diamond in a nut than a nut in a golden box.

Rosette, to prove to me that she was of the same opinion, raised her skirt a little, and showed me the border of an underskirt richly embroidered with flowers and foliage; it only rested with myself then to have been admitted into the secrets of her most magnificent wear; but I did not ask to see if the splendour of the chemise was equal to that of the skirt, though it is probable that its luxuriousness was no less. Rosette let fall her skirt, surprised at my indifference. Still this exhibition had served to display the beginning of a perfectly turned calf and to give the utmost promise for the upper part. The leg she stretched out the better to display her underskirt was really of miraculous fineness and gracefulness in its pearl-gray silk stocking, tight and well-fitting, and the little heeled slipper ornamented with a bow at the toe was like a real Cinderella's shoe. I paid her the most sincere compliments, and I told her that I did not know a prettier leg or smaller foot, and that I did not think it possible for any to be more shapely. To this she replied with a frankness and ingenuousness quite charming and clever:

"Quite true."

Then she went to a panel in the wall, and took out a flask or two of liqueurs and a few plates of biscuits and sweets, placed them all upon a little table, and sat down by me upon a little easy chair, so narrow that in order not to be too crowded I was obliged to put my arm round her waist. As she had two hands free, and I only had my left of any use to me, she poured out the wine and helped me to biscuits; soon noticing that I was rather clumsy, she said, "Come, never mind; I will feed you, dear child, as you cannot feed yourself." Then she raised the food to my mouth, and forced me to swallow it more quickly than I liked by pushing it in with her pretty fingers, absolutely in the way birds are fed when they are being crammed, and that made her laugh very much. I could hardly help returning to her fingers the kiss she had given just before to the palm of my hand, and as if to prevent me, but really to furnish me with an opportunity to better place my kiss, she patted my mouth two or three times with the back of her hand. We had a glass or two of Canary wine, not much certainly, but enough to excite two women only used to water. Rosette leant back upon my arm very lovingly. She had taken off her cloak, and I could see the commencement of the throat, which was tense and still in her bent position: its tint was ravishingly delicate and transparent; its shape was slender and at the same time marvelously solid. I contemplated her for some time with indefinable emotion and pleasure, and the thought came into my mind that men were more favored than we were in their love affairs, that we gave them possession of the most charming treasures, and they had nothing like them to offer us. What pleasure there must be in traversing with the lips such fine polished skin and such rounded contours, which seem to come to meet the kiss and provoke it! This satiny flesh, these undulating lines running one into the other, the hair so silky and soft to the touch; what inexhaustible incentives they are for delicate pleasures which men cannot offer us! Our caresses can hardly be but passive, and yet there is more pleasure in giving than in receiving.

Most certainly I should not have made such remarks a year ago, and I could have looked at all the throats and shoulders in the world without interest as to whether they were of good or bad shape; but since I have discarded the attire of my sex and live with young men, a sentiment quite unknown has developed in me—the sentiment of beauty. Women are usually deprived of it. I know not why, for at first they seem better judges of it than men; but though there are some who possess it, yet the knowledge of oneself is the most difficult of all knowledge, and it is therefore not surprising they do not understand it. Usually if a woman thinks another woman very pretty one may be sure the latter is very ugly, and no man will notice her. In return, all women whose beauty and grace are noted by the men are unanimously considered abominable and affected by the skirted brigade; they raise endless comment. If I were what I appear to be, I would take no other guide in my choice, and woman's disapprobation would be a sufficient certificate of beauty for me.

Now I love and know beauty; the clothes I wear separate me from my sex and take away all rivalry; I am even in a better position to judge than any one else. I am no longer a woman, but not yet a man, and desire will never blind me into taking lay figures for idols; I see coldly and without prejudice either for or against, and my position is as perfectly disinterested a one as possible.

The length and fineness of the lashes, the transparence of the temples, the modeling of the ear, the tone and quality of the hair, the well-bred appearance of the feet and hands, the coupling more or less loosely of the legs and wrists, a thousand things which I did not notice, and which constitute real beauty and prove good breeding, guide me in my appreciation and hardly admit of a mistake. I believe any man might accept with their eyes shut a woman of whom I had said, "Really, she is not bad."

Consequently I am a much better judge of pictures than formerly, and although I have only a very superficial smattering of art, it would be difficult to make me pass a bad work as a good one; I find a strange and profound charm in this study, for, as in everything else, moral or physical beauty requires to be studied, and cannot be grasped at once.

But to return to Rosette; from this subject to her the transition is not a difficult one, and they are two ideas which invite companionship.

As I have said, the beauty was leaning back upon my arm with her head against my shoulder; emotion tinted her beautiful cheeks a delicate rose color, which admirably set off the deep black of a coquettishly placed beauty spot; her teeth gleamed through her smile like raindrops in the heart of a poppy, and her half-lowered lashes still further increased the humid brilliancy of her great eyes; a ray of sunlight produced a thousand gleams upon her silky hair, several curls of which had escaped and hung in repentance upon her plump, round neck, setting off its whiteness; a few little tresses more unruly than the others having become detached from the rest, were twisted in capricious spirals, and gilded by strange reflections, which in the light assumed all the colors of the prism; these threads of gold were like the halos which in the old pictures surround the heads of virgins. We were both silent, and I amused myself by following, beneath the pearly transparence of her temples, her little azure veins, and the tapering of the down at the extremity of her brows.

The beauty seemed to retire within herself and cradle herself in dreams of infinite pleasure; her arms hung down at her sides as undulating and soft as loose sashes; her head leant further and further backward, as if the muscles which sustained it had been cut or were too weak to support it. She had withdrawn her two little feet beneath her skirt, and had succeeded in entirely retiring into the corner of the easy chair I occupied, so that although it was very narrow there was an empty space on the other side.

Her yielding and supple body was modeled upon mine like wax, and took its external contour with the greatest possible exactness; water could not have filled the curves more closely. Thus leaning against my side, she was like the double outline which painters add to their subjects on the shadow side, to make them look fatter and better fed. Only an amorous woman could have such undulations and enlacements. In comparison ivy was far behind her.

The gentle warmth of her body penetrated through her clothing and my own; a thousand magnetic streams vibrated around her; her entire life seemed to have passed into me and to have left her completely. Moment by moment she languished, expired, and bent more and more. A light perspiration stood upon her shining forehead; her eyes moistened, and two or three times she made a movement as if to raise her hands to hide them; but halfway her weary arms fell back upon her knees, and she did not succeed; a large tear overflowed from her eyes and trickled down her burning cheeks, where it was soon absorbed.

My position became very embarrassing and passably ridiculous; I felt that I must appear enormously stupid and that annoyed me extremely, although I had no power to alter it. Enterprise was forbidden me, and certainly that was the only method which would please her now. I was too sure of not receiving any resistance to run the risk, and really I did not know of what wood to make an arrow. The use of gallant phrases and madrigals was satisfactory in the beginning, but nothing would appear more insipid at this stage; to get up and go out would have been the greatest rudeness; and besides, I am not sure that Rosette would not have played the part of Potiphar's wife, and have detained me by the corner of my cloak. I should have had no virtuous motive in resisting her; and then, to my shame, I must admit that this scene, though equivocal in its character to me, was not without a certain charm which restrained me longer than necessary; my ardent love was kindled at her flame, and I was really angry at my unfortunate position; I even desired to be a man as effectively as I appeared, to return her love, and I regretted very much that Rosette was mistaken. My breathing quickened, I felt the blushes mount to my face, and I was scarcely less troubled than my poor sweetheart. The idea of the similarity of our sexes gradually disappeared, leaving only a vague sense of pleasure; my glances were veiled, my lips trembled, and if Rosette had been a cavalier, instead of being what she was, how happy should I have been.

In the end, being unable to contain

herself, she got up quickly, making a sort of spasmodic movement, and began to rapidly pace the room; then she stopped in front of the mirror and rearranged a few strands of her hair. During this time I cut a poor figure, and I hardly knew what demeanor to assume.

She stopped in front of me and seemed to reflect.

She thought that a mad timidity alone restrained me, and that I was more of a schoolboy than she had at first believed. Excited by her love, she wished to make a supreme effort, and risk the loss of the part to gain the whole.

She came to me and quicker than lightning sat down upon my knees, passed her arms around my neck, clasped her hands behind my head, and her mouth seized mine in a furious embrace.

Suddenly a loud barking sounded outside the door with a noise of scratching feet. The door gave way and a beautiful white greyhound entered the hut, yelping and jumping.

Rosette got up quickly and ran to the end of the room. The beautiful white greyhound leapt with joy around her and tried to reach her hands to lick them; she was so troubled that she had great difficulty in readjusting her cloak on her shoulders

This greyhound was the favorite dog of her brother Alcibiades; the animal never left him, and when the dog appeared it was certain that the master was not far away; that was the reason poor Rosette was so frightened.

A moment later Alcibiades himself, booted and spurred, came in whip in hand. "Ah, here you are then," he said. "I have been looking for you for more than an hour, and I should never have found you if my good dog Smug had not discovered your hiding-place." He cast a half-serious, half-joking glance at his sister, which made her blush up to the white of her eyes. "You had apparently some very thorny subjects to discuss to retire to such profound solitude? You doubtless were talking of theology and the double nature of the soul?"

"Oh, no! Our occupation was hardly as sublime as that; we were eating sweets and talking fashions, that is all."

"I don't think so. You seemed to me to be profoundly buried in some sentimental dissertation; but to distract you after your vaporous conversation, I think it would be a good idea for you to take a turn on horseback with me. I have a new mare I want to try. You shall ride her too, Theodore, and we will see what she is like."

We all three went out together, Alcibiades giving me his arm, while I gave mine to Rosette. The expressions on our faces were strangely varied: Alcibiades had a pensive look, I was quite at my ease, while Rosette seemed exceedingly annoyed.

Alcibiades had arrived just at the right time for me, but very inopportunely for Rosette, who lost, or thought she had done so, by it, the reward of her attacks and ingenious tactics. She had to begin again; had he been a quarter of an hour later, I am sure I do not know what the upshot of this adventure would have been; I see no possible ending. Perhaps it would have been better if Alcibiades had not intervened precisely at the crucial moment; the situation must have reached a climax in one way or another. During this scene I was two or three times on the point of confessing to Rosette who I was; but the fear of being taken for an adventuress and of seeing my secret divulged kept back from my lips the words which they were ready to utter.

Such a state of things could not last. My departure was the only way of cutting short this purposeless intrigue, so at dinner I announced that I was leaving the following day. Rosette, who was sitting by my side, nearly fainted on hearing my statement and dropped her glass. Pallor suddenly overspread her beautiful face; she cast me a sorrowful glance, full of reproach, which made me as agitated and disturbed as she was herself.

The aunt raised her wrinkled hands in a movement of pained surprise, and in her shrill and quavering voice, which now trembled more than usual, said, "Surely, my dear Theodore, you are not going to leave us like that? It is not kind of you; yesterday you showed not the slightest inclination to go. The post has not come, so you have received no letters, and have no excuse. You promised us another fortnight and now you are going to disappoint us; it is not right of you to do so; you cannot go back on your word. See what a face Rosette is making at you, and how glad she will be for you to stay. I warn you that I desire it as much as she does, and that I shall pull just as long a face, and at sixty-eight that is a great deal more terrible than at twenty-three. See to what you are voluntarily exposing yourself: to the anger of the aunt and niece, and all for some caprice which has suddenly seized you between the cheese and the dessert."

Alcibiades swore, giving the table a heavy blow with his fist, that he would barricade the gates of the château and hamstring my horse rather than let me go.

Rosette threw me another glance so sad and supplicating that it would have needed the ferocity of a famished tiger, one without food for a week, not to have been touched. I did not resist, and although it considerably annoyed me to do so, I gave a solemn promise to stay. Dear Rosette would gladly have clung to my neck and kissed me for my kindness; Alcibiades grasped my fingers in his huge hand and shook my arms so violently that he nearly dislocated my shoulder, bent my rings oval, and cut my fingers rather deeply.

Still Rosette did not quite recover her spirits; the idea that I could go away and that I desired to do so, an idea that had not before been brought clearly to her mind, threw her into a profound reverie. The color the news of my departure had chased from her cheeks did not come back as quickly as formerly; she was still pale of face, with an anxious feeling in her heart. My conduct towards her surprised her more and more. After the pronounced advances she had made me, she did not understand the motives which led me to exercise so much restraint in my relations with her. Her desire was, before my departure, to lead me into a definite engagement, not doubting that after that it would be easy to retain me as long as she wished.

In that she was right, and had I not been a woman her calculation would have been correct, for although the satiety of pleasure and the disgust which usually follows it is talked of, any man whose heart is in the right place, and who is not miserably and incurably blasé, feels his love grow with his happiness, and very often the best way for a woman to keep a lover who is ready to break loose is to give herself to him with entire abandon.

Rosette had the intention of leading me into something definite before my departure. Knowing how difficult it is later on to resume a liaison at the point where it is broken off, and besides never being sure of meeting me again under such favorable circumstances, she neglected no opportunity which arose of putting me in a position to speak clearly and to quit the evasive style in which I took refuge. As I had on my side the formal and determined intention to avoid any encounter like that in the rustic pavilion, and still could not without attracting ridicule display too much coolness to Rosette and introduce childish prudery into our relations, I hardly knew what attitude to adopt, and I tried to always manage to have a third person in our company. Rosette, on the contrary, tried all she could to be alone with me, and she often enough succeeded, the château being some distance from the town and not much frequented by the gentry of the neighborhood. This secret resistance saddened and surprised her; occasionally there arose in her mind doubts and hesitancy as to the power of her charms, and seeing how little she was loved, she was not at times far off the belief that she was ugly. Then she doubled her attentions and coquetry, and although her mourning did not allow her to employ the aids of the toilette to their fullest extent, she still succeeded in adorning herself and varying her dress so that every day she was two or three times more charming than on the previous day, and that is not saying a little. She tried everything. She was jolly, melancholy, tender, passionate, obliging, coquettish, and even simpering; she assumed one after another all those masks which suit women so well, that it is impossible to decide whether they are masks or real faces; she arrayed herself in eight or ten contrasted individualities in succession to see which would please me and to fix upon that one. In herself alone she provided me with a complete seraglio, and all I had to do was to throw the handkerchief; but on her part nothing succeeded.

The lack of success of all these stratagems caused her to fall into a profound stupor. Days passed and she made no progress. She was visibly affected by it; an expression of uneasy sadness had taken the place of the fresh smile upon her lips; the corners of her mouth, which had been so gayly curved, had drooped appreciably, and formed a firm and serious line; a few little veins became more marked in her tender eyes; her cheeks, formerly so peachlike had only retained their imperceptible bloom. Often from my window I saw her cross the garden in her morning wrapper; she walked hardly raising her feet, as if she slid, with her two arms crossed upon her breast, her head bowed, more bent than a willow bough hanging in the water, and with an undulating and heavy motion like that of drapery which was too long and trailed upon the ground. At these times she looked like one of those ancient lovers, a victim of Venus's rage whom the pitiless goddess had furiously attacked. I could picture to myself Psyche like that after she had lost Cupid.

The days when she did not force herself to overcome my coolness and hesitation her love had a simple and primitive charm which fascinated me; then hers was a silent and trusting abandonment, a chaste facility for caresses, and an inexhaustible abundance and plenitude of heart, in fact all the treasures of a beautiful nature bestowed without reserve. She was free from the pettiness and meanness so common in even the best of women; she did not attempt any disguise, but allowed me to see the extent of her love. Her self-respect did not revolt for an instant because I did not respond to her advances, for pride leaves the heart the day love enters, and if ever any one were truly loved it was I. She suffered, but without complaint or bitterness, and she only attributed the lack of success of her efforts to herself. Yet her pallor increased every day, for the lilies and roses had joined battle upon her cheeks, and the roses had been decisively routed; it pained me to see this, but I was as powerless as any one else. The more gently and affectionately I spoke to her, the more caressing were my ways, the deeper I buried the barbed arrow of impossible love in her heart. In consoling her to-day I prepared for her a much more terrible despair in the future: my remedies poisoned her wound while seeming to stanch it. I repented to some extent of all the agreeable things I had said, and I should have liked, because of my extreme friendship for her, to discover a way to make her hate me.

I tried two or three times to speak unkindly to her, but I quickly returned to the madrigal, for I was less afraid of her smile than her tears. On these occasions, although the loyalty of the intention fully absolved me in my conscience, I was more touched than I need have been, and I experienced something not far removed from remorse. A tear can hardly be dried any other way but by a kiss, and one cannot with decency leave such a task to a handkerchief, though it be of the finest cambric in the world; I undid what I had done, the tear was quickly forgotten, more quickly than the kiss, and my embarrassment was afterwards doubled.

Rosette, who sees that I am going to escape her, clings obstinately and sadly to the remnants of her hope, and my position is becoming more and more complicated. The strange sensation I experienced in the little hut, and the inconceivable agitation into which I was thrown by the ardor of the caresses of my beautiful sweetheart, have been several times renewed, though with less violence; and often when sitting near Rosette hand in hand, and listening to her cooing voice, I imagine that I am a man, as she believes me to be, and that if I do not respond to her love it is pure cruelty on my part.

One evening, by some accident, I was alone in the green room with the old lady; she had in her hand a piece of tapestry, for in spite of being sixty-eight she was never idle, wishing, so she said, to finish before her death a piece of work she had begun and labored upon for a very long time. Feeling a little tired, she put down her work and leant back in her armchair. She looked at me very attentively and her gray eyes sparkled through her spectacles with strange vivacity; she passed two or three times her dry hand over her wrinkled forehead and appeared to be thinking deeply. The recollection of the past and her regrets gave her face an expression of melancholy affection. I was silent for fear of disturbing her thoughts, and the silence lasted for some moments; at last she broke it.

"They are Henry's eyes, my dear Henry's; the same humid and brilliant glance, the same carriage of the head, the same gentle though proud face; you are just like him. You cannot imagine how great the likeness is, Theodore; when I look at you, I cannot believe that Henry is dead; I think he can only have been on a long journey and returned at last. You have caused me great pleasure and great pain, Theodore; pleasure in recalling to my mind my poor Henry, pain in showing me how great my loss has been; sometimes I have taken you for his spirit. I cannot reconcile myself to the idea that you are going to leave us. It seems to me that I am again losing my dear Henry."

I told her that if it were really possible for me to stay longer I would do so with pleasure, but that my stay had already extended beyond its proper limits; that besides I proposed to return, and the château would leave me with memories too agreeable to be quickly forgotten.

"However angry I may be at your departure, Theodore," she went on, following out her idea, "there is some one who will be more so. You understand my meaning. I do not know what we shall do with Rosette after you have gone. Now this old château is very melancholy. Alcibiades is always engaged in some kind of sport, and for a young woman the society of a poor invalid like me is not very cheerful."

"If any one ought to regret, it is not you, madam, nor Rosette, but myself; you lose little, I much; you will easily find more charming society than mine, but it is more than doubtful if I can ever replace Rosette's and yours."

"I do not desire to quarrel with your modesty, my dear sir, but I know what I know, and I am speaking from my knowledge. It is probable that we shall not see Madam Rosette in a good temper for a long time, for it is you now who cause the rain and the fine weather upon her cheeks. Her period of mourning is over, and it will be very unpleasant for her to take off her gayety with her last black garment; that would be a very bad example and quite contrary to the ordinary rule. Now you can prevent that without much trouble, and you must do so," the old lady said, laying great stress on the last few words.

"Certainly I will do my best so that your niece may retain her gayety, since you credit me with such influence over her. Still, I hardly see how I am to do it."

"Oh, you hardly see! What use are your beautiful eyes? I did not know you were so shortsighted. Rosette is free, she has an income of eighty thousand francs in her own right, and that would make women twice as ugly as she is very pretty. You are young, well made, and, I believe, unmarried; it seems to me to be the simplest thing in the world, unless you have an insupportable horror of Rosette, and that is hard to believe."

"That is not, and cannot be; for her soul is equal to her body, and she is one of those women who could be ugly without its being noticeable or thought desirable for them to be otherwise."

"She could be ugly with impunity and

she is charming; that is a double reason. I do not doubt your word, but she has taken the wiser alternative. On her part I would willingly answer that there are a thousand persons she hates more than she does you, and that if she were asked several times she would perhaps end by admitting that you did not exactly displease her. You have on your finger a ring which would fit her to perfection, for your hand is nearly as small as hers, and I am almost certain she would accept it with pleasure."

The good lady stopped for a few moments to see the effect her words produced upon me, and I do not know whether she was satisfied by the expression of my face. I was terribly embarrassed, and I did not know what reply to make. From the commencement of the conversation I had seen the tendency of her insinuations, and although I almost expected the words she had just uttered, I remained surprised and abashed. My only course was a refusal, but what probable motive could I advance for such a refusal? I had none, except that I was a woman. That was, it is true, an excellent reason, but exactly the one I did not care to state.

I could hardly fall back upon ferocious and ridiculous relations; all the relatives in the world would have accepted such a union with enthusiasm. Had Rosette not been what she was, good, beautiful, and well-born, the income of eighty thousand francs would have swept aside all obstacles.

To say that I did not love her would be neither true nor honorable, for I really loved her dearly, much more than a woman loves a woman. I was too young to pretend to be already engaged. My best plan seemed to be to give her to understand that, being the youngest member of the family, the interests of the house required me to join the Order of Malta, and did not permit me to think of marriage, and that it caused me the greatest grief since I had seen Rosette.

This reply was not worth a rap, and I quite realized that fact. The old lady was not duped and did not look upon it as definite; she thought I had made use of it to give myself time to reflect and to consult my relatives. In reality such an alliance was so advantageous and unexpected on my side that it was impossible for me to refuse, even had I loved Rosette but little or not at all; it was a piece of good fortune not to be neglected.

I do not know whether the aunt made the overtures at the niece's instigation, yet I am inclined to think that Rosette had nothing to do with it. She loved me too simply and ardently to think of anything but my immediate possession, and marriage would assuredly have been the last method she would have employed. The dowager, who must have noticed our intimacy, and without a doubt believed it to be greater than it really was, had arranged the little plan in her head to keep me with her, and as much as possible replace her dear son Henry, killed in the war, to whom she considered I bore such a striking likeness. She had delighted in the idea and profited by that moment of solitude to have an explanation with me. I saw by her manner that she did not consider herself beaten, and that she soon proposed to return to the charge, and that vexed me considerably.

Rosette on her part on the same night

made a last effort, which had such serious results that I must make a special story of it, for I cannot include it in this letter, which is already of unreasonable length. You will see for what strange adventures I was predestined, and how Heaven had beforehand designed me for a heroine of romance. I hardly know what morality could be drawn from all this, but existences are not like fables, each chapter has not at its end a rhymed sentence. Very often the sensation of life is that it is not death. That is all. Good-by, dear. I kiss your beautiful eyes. You will receive directly the continuation of my triumphant biography.

CHAPTER XIII

MORE SWEET THAN POESY

THEODORE—Rosalind—for I know not which name to call you—I come from seeing you just now and I write to you—that I would know your woman's name! It must be as the honey, and hover on the lips more sweet and more harmonious than poesy!

I have never dared to say that to you, and yet I shall die of my silence. No one knows nor will understand what I have suffered. Myself, I am not able to give a feeble idea; words fail to tell of such agonies. I appear to have turned my sentence to pleasure, being driven hard to say some things new and singular and giving the most extravagant exaggerations, when I depict what I have proved with pictures sufficiently troublesome.

O Rosalind! I love you! I adore you! There is no stronger word to express my feelings! I have never loved I have never adored any one but you. I prostrate myself, I humble myself before you, and I would force all creation to bend the knee before my idol; you are to me more than all nature, more than myself, more than God. It appears strange to me that God has not come down from heaven to be your slave. Where you are not all is desert, all is death, all is blackness; you alone people the world for me; you are the life, the sun—you are all. Your smile makes the day, your sadness the night; the spheres follow the movements of your body, and the celestial harmonies rule over you. O my dear queen! O my beautiful real dream! You are clothed in splendor, and you swim without ceasing in floods of radiance.

It is hardly three months since I first met you. But I have loved you for a very long time. Before seeing you I languished of love for you; I called you, I sought you, and I despaired of you ever crossing my path, for I knew that I should never be able to love another woman. Many times have you appeared to me at the window of the mysterious castle leaning sadly on the balcony and casting to the winds the petals of some flower—or else, petulant Amazon, on your Turkish steed whiter than snow, traversing at a gallop the somber paths of the forest. How charming you were, with your eyes confiding and soft, your transparent hands, your beautiful wavy hair and your half-smile, so adorably disdainful. Only you were less handsome, for the most ardent and unbridled imagination of a painter or a poet may not attain to the sublime poesy of the reality. There is in you a spring of inexhaustible grace.

a fountain always gushing forth irresistible seduction; you are an ornament of the most precious pearls, and in your least movements, in your gestures there is forgetfulness, as well as in your most abandoned poses. You include in each instance, with a royal profusion, some inestimable treasure of beauty. If the outlines of a figure, if the fugitive lines of an attitude were able to be fixed conserved in a mirror, the glasses before which you have passed might be mistaken, as some public-house signs are, for the most divine paintings of Raphael. Each gesture, each toss of the head, each different aspect of your beauty is graven on the mirror of my soul with a diamond point, and nothing in the world shall have power to efface the profound impression. I know in which place was the shadow and which place was the light; the flat that brightened the rays of the day and the place where the reflection wandered so melting with the more softened complexion of the neck and the cheeks. Absent I delineate you; your ideal pose is always before me. As a child I remained for entire hours upright before the pictures of the old masters, and searched with avidity the dark depths, gazing at the beautiful figures of saints and of goddesses, the flesh of which, of the whiteness of ivory or of wax, stood out so marvelously from the dark background. I admire the simplicity and the magnificence of their figures, the strange grace of their hands and their feet, the pride and the fine character of their features, at the same time so fine and so firm, the grandeur of the draperies that cling about their divine forms, the purplish folds of which appear to lengthen and embrace their fine bodies. By dint of stubbornly plunging my eyes into the canvas thickly smoked by age, my view so disturbed the outlines, some objects losing their precision, and one species of live motionless and dead animated all these pale phantoms of vanished beauty. I ended by discovering these figures had a vague resemblance to the beautiful unknown I adored to the bottom of my heart. I sighed and thought the one I must love was perhaps one of them, and had perhaps been dead these three hundred years. That idea affected me often to the point of shedding tears, and I railed against myself in great anger for not being born in the sixteenth century, when all these beauties had lived. I found it was on my part now a want of skill and unpardonable blunder. As I grew older the sweet phantom beset me yet more closely; I was seeing continually between myself and the women with whom I had love affairs a jeering and ironical smile, taking from their human charm all the perfection of the divine beauty. It made some very charming women made for giving happiness appear ugly in my eyes.

However, I shall not have been enamored of an adorable shadow the actual body of which I did not believe existed, though it was the presentiment of your own beauty. O Rosalind! I have been so unhappy because of you before knowing you.

O Theodore! I have been unhappy because of you after having known you. If you will, you are able to open to me the paradise of my dreams. You are standing on the threshold as a guardian angel with folded wings, and you hold the golden key in your beautiful hands. Speak, Rosalind, speak, will you?

I await only one word from you to seal my fate. Do decide! Are you Apollo, the hunter from heaven, or Aphrodite rising from the bosom of the sea? Where have you left your car of gems harnessed to four horses of flame? What have you done with your pearl shell and your dolphins with their azure tails? What amorous nymph has melted her body in that of yours in the middle of a kiss? O handsome young man, you are more charming than Cypris or Adonis, more adorable than all the women.

But you are a woman; we are not now in transformation times—Adonis and Hermaphrodite are dead and it is no longer by a man that beauty shall be realized; for since the heroes and gods are no more you alone conserve in your body of marble, as in the Greek temple, the precious gift of form, and show that the earth has nothing to envy heaven. You worthily represent the first divinity of the world, the most pure symbol of eternal essence—beauty. Since I have seen you something has rent in me, a veil has fallen, a door has opened; I have felt internally inundated by many waves of light; I have learned that my life is before me and that I have at last arrived at the decisive crossroads. The lines obscured and lost in the partly shaded faces that I sought to distinguish in the shadow are suddenly illuminated, the brown colors that darkened the bottom of the picture are softly lightened, a tender dewy gleam has glided on the sea, which is a little green in the distance. The trees, ceasing to appear in confusing shapes, have commenced to stand out in a more distinct fashion. The flowers, charged with dew, have spotted with brilliant points the dull green of the turf. I have seen the bullfinch with his scarlet breast at the end of a branch of elder, the little white rabbit with red eyes and straight ears who puts his head between two blades of thyme, passing his feet over his muzzle, and the timid stag who comes to drink at the brook and see the reflection of his horns in the water. From the morning when the sun of love rose on my life everything changed; where vacillated in the shadows some terrifying forms rendered all the more terrible and monstrous by their vagueness, I can now see groups of trees in flower, surrounded by graceful amphitheaters, silver palaces with their terraces strewn with vases and statues bathing their feet in azure lakes and appearing to swim between two heavens. That which I took in the obscurity for a gigantic dragon with wings armed with claws tearing through the night with scaly feet, is a felucca with silken sail and oars painted and gilt, full of women and musicians; and that frightful crab I believed to be waving above my head his claws is a fan palm the long and narrow leaves of which the night breeze is stirring. My fancies and my errors have vanished—I am in love.

Despairing of ever finding you, I accused my dream of lying and I quarreled furiously with fate. I said that I was very mad to seek a like type, or that nature was very infertile and the Creator very incapable, not having power to realize the simple thought of my heart. Prometheus had the noble pride of will to make a man to rival with God; I myself had created a woman, and I believed that in punishment for my audacity a desire always unsatiated gnawed my liver like another vulture. I expected to be enchained with links of steel on a gray rock beside the savage ocean; but the beautiful sea nymphs with their long green hair rising above the waves, their white necks outstretched, and showing to the sun their bodies of pearl-shell all sparkling with tears of the sea, would not come to rest on the shore to converse with and console me in my troubles as in the play of old Aeschylus.

It has not been thus.

You have appeared, and I have blamed the weakness of my imagination. My torment has not been that I fear being perpetually a prey to an idea on a sterile rock; but I have suffered no less. I have seen that in effect you exist, that my presentiments have not lied on that point; but you are presented to me with the ambiguous and terrible beauty of the Sphinx. As Isis, the mysterious goddess, you were enveloped in a veil that I dare not upraise from fear of falling dead. If you knew under my apparent heedlessness with what breathless attention and anxiety I observe you and follow you in all your smallest movements! Nothing escapes me, as I gaze ardently at the little of your flesh which appears, your neck, or your wrists, to try to ascertain your sex! Your hands have been to me a subject of profound study, and I can say that I know the least sinuosities, the most imperceptible veins, the slightest dimple; if you were hidden from head to foot under the most impenetrable mask I could recognize you solely by seeing one of your fingers. I analyze the undulations of your walk, the manner in which you place your feet or brush back your hair. I seek to surprise your secret in the habit of your body; I watch you above all in those hours of lassitude when the bones seem withdrawn from the body and when the limbs are depressed and pliant as if they were untied, to see if the feminine contours are more pronounced in that state of forgetfulness and carelessness.

Never has any person been watched more closely than you; I forget myself for hours in my comtemplation. Retired in some corner of the salon, having in hand a book that I am not reading, or crouched behind the curtain of my chamber when you are in yours and the blinds of your window are raised, and, much impressed by the marvelous beauty which clings around you like a luminous atmosphere, I say to myself, assuredly that is a woman. Then all at once a movement brusque and bold, a deep tone or a cavalier fashion, destroys in one minute my frail edifice of probabilities, and I repeat my former doubts. I am traversing the uncharted ocean of my amorous musing under full sail, and you come to seek me to fence with you or play tennis. The young girl transformed into a young cavalier gives me some terrible strokes with her foil, striking my own weapon from my hand, as quick and nimble as the bravo trained to fence. Each instant of the day brings a like disappointment. I venture to address you to-day, my dear girl. It is you I adore, and I see you tenderly bending to the ear of a lady and whispering beyond her hair some facetious poem or compliment. Judge of my situation—or well, some woman, that in my strange jealousy I might live with the greatest voluptuousness in the world, she hanging on your arm and holding you aside for confiding to you some puerile secrets and holding you for hours in the recess of the window.

I am enraged at seeing the woman speak to you, for that makes me believe you are a man, and even had you been I should not have suffered such extreme pain. When the men approach freely and familiarly I am still more jealous, because I dream that you are a woman, and that they have perhaps the same suspicion as myself. I am a prey to the most contrary passions, and know not what to do.

I am angry with myself; I most bitterly reproach myself for being thus tormented by a visionary love and not having the strength to tear from my heart that venomous plant which sprang up in a night like a poisonous mushroom. I curse you, I call you my evil genius, I have believed in the same instant that you are Beelzebub in person, for I have no power to explain the sensation I experience before you. When I was fully persuaded that you were a woman in disguise, the improbability of motives likely to justify such a caprice renewed my uncertainty, and I began again to deplore that the ideal I had dreamed for the love of my soul belonged to some one of the same sex as myself. I reviled the chance that had made a man of such charming appearance, and for my eternal misfortune had brought us together when I had given up hope of seeing realized the idea of pure beauty that I had caressed for so long in my heart. Now, Rosalind, I have the profound certainty that you are the most beautiful of women; I have seen you in the costume of your sex. I have seen your shoulders, your arms so pure and so correctly rounded, and the commencement of your breast, as displayed by your partly open vest, and they can belong only to a young girl; Meleager, the beautiful hunter, nor Bacchus the effeminate, with their doubtful forms, have ever had a like softness of lines nor such fine skins, although both being of marble of Paros polished by the amorous kisses of twenty ages, I am not tormented in that direction. But that is not all. You are a woman, and my love is no longer reprehensible. I can then display my feelings without remorse and allow myself to drift towards you. Great and unbridled though the passion be that I experience, it is permitted, and I avow it. Rosalind, for you I burn in silence, and you ignore the immensity of my love. That revelation is slow in coming to you. That is not surprising. I hate you not; I love you. Will you be able to love me? I know not—and I tremble, for I am more unhappy now than before. For instance, it appears to me that you do not hate me. When we have acted if I *please you,* you have given to certain parts of your rôle a particular accent which has augmented the sense and in some way induced me to declare myself. I have believed that I saw in your eyes and in your smile gracious promise of indulgence, and felt your hand respond to the pressure of mine. If I was deceived! O God! That is a thing on which I dare not reflect! Encouraged by all that and urged by my love, I have written to you, for the clothing you wear ill suits such a confession, and a thousand times have the words stopped on my lips, even when I had the idea and firm conviction that I spoke to a woman; that male costume shocked all my tender, loving thoughts and hindered them from taking their flight towards you.

I beg you, Rosalind, if you do not yet love me, strive to do so; me who has loved you in spite of all, under the veil which envelops you by pity for us without doubt. Devote not the rest of your life to more frightful despair and to more gloomy discouragement; dream that I adore you, from the first ray of the thought in my head that you were revealed before, and that since I was a child you have appeared to me in dreams with a crown of drops of dew, two prismatic wings, and a little blue flower in your hand. That you are the aim, the means, and the savor of my life; that without you I am nothing but a vain apparition, and that if you blow out the flame you have lighted there will remain at the most of me one pinch of dust more fine and impalpable than that which sprinkles the wings of the dead. Rosalind, you have many recipes for healing love-sickness, heal me, for I am very ill. Play your part up to the end. Throw off the clothing of the beautiful page Ganymede and give your white hand to the youngest son of the brave knight Roland de Bois.

CHAPTER XIV

THEODORE'S SURPRISE

I WAS at my window occupied in gazing at the stars, which were twinkling joyously in the flower-gardens of heaven, and breathing the beautiful perfume of the night borne upon a dying breeze. The wind from the open window had extinguished my lamp, the last which remained alight in the château. My thoughts degenerated into vague reverie, and a species of somnolence took me. However, I remained still leaning on the stone balustrade, fascinated by the charm of the night. Careless and forgetful Rosette, seeing my lamp no longer burning, and not being able to distinguish me because of a great angle of shadow which fell precisely on the window, had believed without doubt that I was gone to bed, and the time had come for risking a last and desperate attempt. She pushed the door so softly that I did not hear her enter, and she was within two steps of me before I perceived her. She was very astonished at seeing me still up, but quickly recovering from her surprise, she came to me and took my arm and called me twice by my name, "Theodore, Theodore."

"What, you, Rosette, here at this hour, all alone without a light!"

"Is that a reproach, Theodore? or is it only a simple phrase purely exclamatory? Yes, me, Rosette, the beautiful lady, here in your room with you, and not in mine, where I should be at eleven o'clock at night or perhaps midnight, without duenna or chaperon or maid—that is very astonishing, is it not? I am quite as surprised as you, and I know not what explanation to give you." In saying that she passed one of her arms around my body.

"Rosette," I said, trying to free myself, "I must relight the lamp; nothing is more sad than darkness in a chamber—and then it is truly murder not seeing clearly when you are present and being deprived of the spectacle of your beauty. Permit me the means of getting a morsel of tinder and a match.

that I may make a little sun to illuminate all that the jealous night effaces under her shadows."

"That is no hardship; I prefer you not to see my blushes. I feel my cheeks all burning, for I am dying of shame."

She dropped her face upon my breast; she remained some minutes thus, as if suffocated with emotion. I, during that time, passed mechanically my fingers through the long curls of her streaming hair. I sought in my brain some honest way of escaping from my embarrassing position, but found it not. I was in my last entrenchment, and Rosette appeared quite decided not to retire from the position she had taken up. I myself had only an open dressing-gown, which very poorly disguised me, and I was uneasy as to the result.

"Theodore, hear me," said Rosette, rising, throwing her hair on both sides of her face as far as I could see in the feeble light that the stars and a tiny crescent of the moon, which had just commenced to rise, threw into the room through the open casement. "The step that I take is a strange one; everybody will blame me for it; but you are leaving very soon, and I love you! I will not let you go without being explicit with you. Perhaps you may never return; perhaps this is the first and last time that I shall see you. Who knows where you go? But go where you will, you carry my spirit and my life with you. If you were remaining I should not have come to this extremity! The happiness of contemplating and of hearing you, of living by the side of you would have sufficed. I should have demanded nothing more. I should have shut up my love in my heart; you would only have looked upon me as a good and sincere friend. But that may not be. You say that absolutely you must leave—that wearies you. Theodore, look upon me not as an amorous shadow that may not follow you and would vanish in your body. It must displease you to find, always behind you, the same suppliant eyes and hands held out to seize the border of your mantle. I know you, but this will not hinder me. Besides, you cannot complain. Is it not your own fault? I was calm, tranquil, almost happy, before knowing you. You arrive, handsome, young, smiling like a Phœbus, the charming god. You have paid me the most impressive attentions, the most delicate homage. Never was a cavalier more spiritual and more gallant. Your lips each minute let fall some roses and rubies—everything becoming for you an occasion for poesy, and you know how to turn the most insignificant phrases into adorable compliments. A woman who at first mortally hated you would finish by loving you, and I loved you from the instant I saw you. Why, then, do you appear surprised, having been so amiable, at being dearly loved? Is it not a natural consequence? I am not a fool nor thoughtless, nor a little romantic girl who falls in love with the first sword she sees. I know the world and what is called life. What I am doing, all women—even the most virtuous, most prudish—have done as much. What idea and what intention have you? That of pleasing me, I imagine. For I cannot suppose any other. Why is it then that you have such a sorrowful look, having so completely succeeded? If I have done anything unwittingly that has displeased you, I demand your pardon. Is it that you do not find me beautiful enough, or have you discovered in me some great default that you reject? You have the right of being hard to please. But you have lied strangely if I am not beautiful. I am young as you, and I love you. Why now do you disdain me?

"You are eager to be near me, you sustain my arm with such constant solicitude, you press so tenderly the hand I give you, you raise towards me such languorous eyes. If you love me not, of what good is all this deception? Would you by chance be so cruel as to light the flame of love in a heart afterwards to make it the subject of laughter? Ah, that would be horrible raillery, an impiety, a sacrilege! That would only be the amusement of a deranged mind and I do not believe that of you. What is then the cause of this sudden change of front? As for me, I can see nothing. What mystery hides a coldness like this? I will not believe that you have any repugnance for me; of that you have given proof, for no one courts a woman keenly for whom he has any dislike. To do so one would need to be the greatest knave on earth. O Theodore, what have you against me? Who has changed you thus? What have I done? If the love that you appeared to have for me has flown, mine, alas, has remained and I cannot tear it from my heart. Have pity on me, Theodore, for I am very unhappy. Do at least seem to love me a little, and speak to me a few soft words that will not cost you much, to prove at least that you have not an insurmountable horror of me."

In that pathetic passage of her discourse her sobs completely choked her voice. She crossed her two hands on my shoulders and there rested her forehead in an attitude of despair. All that she had said was not more than just, and I had no satisfactory reply to make. I was not able to take a bantering tone; that would have been quite out of place. Rosette was not one of those creatures that one has power to treat lightly; besides, I was too touched to be able to do it. I felt myself culpable of playing thus with the heart of a charming woman, and I experienced the most lively and the most sincere remorse in the world. Seeing that I did not answer, the dear child heaved a long sigh and made a movement as if to rise, but she collapsed beneath her emotion. Then she surrounded me with her arms, the freshness of which penetrated my doublet, placed her face on mine, and fell to crying silently. The effect on me, of feeling thus streaming on my cheeks that inexhaustible current of tears, was singular. I was not slow in their mingling with mine, and that was a truly bitter shower, copious enough to cause a new deluge, if it had lasted only forty days. The moon at that instant there shone precisely on the window; one pale ray plunged into the chamber, and lit with a bluish gleam our silent group. With her hair scattered and her dolorous looks, Rosette had the appearance of a figure in alabaster of Melancholy seated on a tomb. As for me I know not how I looked, seeing that I could not see myself, not having a mirror; but I think I could very well have sat for a statue of uncertainty personified. I was troubled, and I lavished on Rosette caresses more tender than usual.

However, making a great effort to

control myself, I told Rosette that she horribly compromised herself by coming into my chamber at such an hour and remaining there so long, that her women would notice her absence, and see that she had not passed the night in her apartment. I said that so softly that Rosette believed, the poor child, that the happy hour she had striven for so laboriously was going to strike at last for her. She was once more disappointed. My situation was most critical, when the door turned on its hinges and gave entrance to Chevalier Alcibiades in person; he held a taper in one hand and his sword in the other. He came straight towards us, putting the light under the nose of the confused Rosette. He said in a bantering tone:

"Good-day, my sister."

Poor little Rosette had not the strength to utter one word in reply.

"It seems, my dear and very virtuous sister, that having judged in your wisdom that the company of Signor Theodore was more pleasant than your own, you have come to visit him? Or perhaps there are ghosts in your chamber and you have thought that you would be safer here, under the protection of the said Signor? That is a good thought. So, Monsieur the Knight of Sérannes, you have made soft eyes at Madam my sister, and you believe that it is no concern of mine. I think it will not be out of place if I cut your throat a little, and if you will be so good I shall be infinitely obliged to you. Theodore, you have abused the friendship that I had for you, and you make me repent of the good opinion that I at once formed on the loyalty of your character. It is a great pity."

I, not being able to defend myself in a valid manner, appearances are against me,—for who would have believed me if I had said, as actually happened, that Rosette had come into my chamber against my will, and that far from seeking to please her, I did all that was possible to turn her away from me?—I had but one thing to say. I said to him:

"Signor Alcibiades, we—we will fight when you please."

During this colloquy Rosette had not omitted to faint, the usual action under similar circumstances. I went to a crystal cup full of water, and after plunging the end of a great white rose partly in bloom into it, I sprinkled some drops on her face that made her come to promptly. Not knowing how to keep her countenance, she collapsed beside the bed and buried her pretty head under the coverlet, like a bird preparing for sleep. She had so gathered the wraps and the cushions around her that it would have been very difficult to discern what it was under the heap. Some sweet little sighs going forth from time to time alone made it possible to discover that it was a young repentant sinner, or at least one excessively sorry for sinning in intention and not in reality, which was the case of poor Rosette. Monsieur the brother, not having any more uneasiness about his sister, resumed the dialogue, and said to me in a somewhat gentler tone:

"It is not absolutely indispensable for us to cut each other's throats immediately; that is an extreme means and one is always in time to exert oneself. Listen; the match is not equal between us. You are in your first youth, and much less vigorous than I. If we fight I shall kill you, or assuredly disfigure you; and I would rather not kill nor disfigure you; that would be a pity. Rosette, who is down there under the coverlet without speaking, would attempt my life, for she is spiteful and bad as a tigress when she is upset, that dear little dove. You don't know that; you who have been her Prince Galaor, and who received nothing but charming sweetness, all without avail. Rosette is free, you also. It appears you are not irreconcilable enemies; her mourning is drawing to an end, and the best thing in the world for her. Marry her; she will not want to live alone again. And in that case I shall refrain from making you the scabbard of my sword—that would not be agreeable either to you or for me. What do you think of it?"

I was obliged to make a horrible grimace, for that which he proposed was of all things in the world the most impracticable for me. I would sooner have walked with four feet against the ceiling as the flies do, and unhooked the sun without taking the footstool to heighten me, than do that which he demanded of me, and yet the last proposition was incontestably more agreeable than the first. He appeared surprised that I did not accept with transport, and repeated what he had said, to give me time to reply.

"The alliance would be most honorable for me, and one I had never dared to hope. I know that it is an unheard-of stroke of luck for a young man who has neither rank nor position in the world, comprising as it does the most illustrious treasure of all, happiness; but, still, I must persist in my refusal, and since I have the liberty of choice between the duel and the marriage, I prefer the duel. That is a singular taste, that few men would have, but it is mine."

Here Rosette uttered a most dolorous sob, raising her head and quickly dropping it again, as a snail when one strikes its horns, on seeing my impassive and determined face.

"It is not that I do not love Madam Rosette; I love her infinitely, but I have reasons for not marrying, which you yourself would find excellent, if it were possible for me to tell you. Besides, things have not gone as far as appearances seem to indicate; beyond some kisses and an ardent friendship, I can explain and justify, there is nothing between us I am ashamed to acknowledge, and the virtue of your sister is assuredly the most intact and the most pure in all the world"—I owed her that testimony. "Now at what time do we fight, Monsieur Alcibiades, and at what place?"

"Here, immediately!" cried Alcibiades, mad with fury.

"What, in the presence of Rosette?"

"Draw, wretch, or I will assassinate you!" he continued, brandishing his sword and waving it round his head.

"At least let us go from the chamber."

"If you don't put up your guard I will nail you against the wall like a bat, my handsome Celadon, and you shall finely flap the wings you will not liberate, I tell you," and he rushed on me with his sword. I drew my rapier, for he would have done as he said, and I contented myself at first with parrying the thrusts he delivered. Rosette made a superhuman effort, trying to throw herself between our swords, for the two combatants were equally dear to her, but her strength betrayed her, and she rolled senseless at the foot of the bed. Our irons clashed, making the noise of an anvil, for the little space we had forced us to close quarters, and Alcibiades two or three times almost reached me, and if I had not had an excellent master with regard to arms my life would have been in great danger, for with astonishing skill and prodigious strength, he exhausted all the ruses and feints of fencing in his efforts to touch me. Enraged at not being able to reach me, he uncovered himself two or three times. I would not profit by the openings, but he returned to the charge in so enraged and savage a fashion that I was forced to seize a chance which he left me, and since the noise, flashing, and whirling of the steel intoxicated and dazzled me, I thought not of death. I had not the least fear; that point, sharp and deadly, which came before my eyes each second, had no more effect upon me than if I was fighting with the button foils, only I was indignant at the brutality of Alcibiades, and the sentiment of my perfect innocence greatly augmented that indignation. I would only prick his arm or his shoulder to make his sword fall from his hands, for I had vainly essayed to strike it from his grip. He had a wrist of iron, and my efforts were quite unavailing. At last he delivered a thrust so fiercely and so low that I could only half parry it. My sleeve was pierced, and I felt the cold iron on my arm, but I was not wounded. At that sight anger took me, and in place of defending I attacked in my turn. I forgot that he was Rosette's brother, and I rushed on him as if he had been my mortal enemy. Profiting by the false position of his sword, I launched a thrust at his flank so well directed that it reached his side. He said "Oh!" and fell backward. I believed him dead, but he was not really, only wounded, and his failure arose from a false step which he had made in essaying to break. I cannot explain the sensation that I then experienced. Certainly it is not a difficult reflection to make that in striking the flesh with a fine and trenchant point, one pierces a hole and the blood gushes out. However, I fell into a profound stupor at seeing growing red stains on the doublet of Alcibiades. I know that never before in my life had I experienced such a great surprise, and it seemed to me that something very much out of the common had taken place.

It was not such an unusual occurrence after all. Still it appeared so to me that the blood ran from a wound, and that the wound had been opened by me, and that a young girl of my age (I was about to write a young man, so have I entered into the spirit of my part) had struck down a vigorous captain trained in arms as was the Signor Alcibiades, all for the crime of seduction and refusal of marriage with a young woman —very rich and, what is more, very charming!

I was truly in a cruelly embarrassing position with the fainting sister, the brother that I believed dead, and myself not much further from being dead or fainting than the other two. I hung to the cord of the bell and I rang loudly enough to awaken the dead, so much that the rope remained in my hand. Leaving to Rosette swooning and to Alcibiades embowelled the task of explaining to the domestics and to the old aunt, I went straight to the stable. The air quickly revived me; I led out my horse and saddled and bridled him myself; I satisfied myself that the crupper and the curb were in good order; I put the stirrups of the same length, I tightened the girths by a notch—briefly—I harnessed him completely with an attention at least singular at such a moment and a calmness inconceivable after a combat thus terminated. I mounted my horse, and I crossed the park by a path that I knew; the branches of the trees all laden with dew whipped me and wetted my face. It was as if the old trees extended their arms to retain me and keep me for love of their chatelaine. If I had been in another state of mind, or at all superstitious, I might have looked upon them as so many phantoms about to seize me and shaking their fists at me. But really my ideas had entirely deserted me and I was gripped by a leaden stupor so strong that I was hardly conscious of its weight on the brain like a helmet too tight; only it seemed to me that I had killed some one, and that was the reason of my departure. I had besides a horrible inclination to sleep because of the early hour, for the violence of the emotions of that night had a physical reaction, and had fatigued me bodily. I arrived at a little gate which opened on the fields by a secret which Rosette had shown me in one of our walks. I dismounted from my horse, I touched the button and pushed the door, I regained the saddle after leading my horse through, and made him gallop so far that I regained the high road to P., where I arrived at early daybreak. This is the very faithful and very circumstantial history of my first good fortune, and my first duel.

CHAPTER XV

NINON

It was five o'clock in the morning when I entered the town. The people in the houses looked out of the windows, the brave natives displaying their benign faces surmounted by a pyramidal night-cap, at the steps of my horse, whose hoofs sounded loudly on the uneven and pebbly road, and the Venuses of the place exhibited their red faces and matutinal bare breasts, as they wearied themselves in conjectures on the unwonted appearance of a traveler in C. at a like hour and in such equipment, for I was very sparsely clothed in a dress to say the least suspicious. I made a little boy, who had his hair over his eyes and a muzzle like a water-spaniel, direct me to an inn, giving him some pence for his pains and a conscientious flick with my riding-whip, which made him fly away screaming like a jay plucked alive. I threw myself on to a bed and slept soundly. When I awoke it was three o'clock in the afternoon. That hardly sufficed to rest me completely. It was not enough for a restless night, an adventure, a duel, and a very rapid and successful flight.

I was very anxious about Alcibiades's wound; but some days after I was completely reassured, for I learnt that nothing dangerous followed and that he was quite convalescent. This relieved me of a singular weight, for the idea of having killed a man strangely tormented me, although it was in legitimate defense and against my own will. I was not yet arrived to that state of sublime indifference to the lives of men which I have since reached.

I returned to C. Many of the young men with whom I had traveled I met again. That gave me pleasure; I became more intimate with them, and they introduced me into many agreeable houses. I was perfectly used to my dress, and the rude and active life I had led and the violent exercises in which I had taken part had rendered me twice as robust as I was before. I followed the young madbrains everywhere; I rode, hunted, and joined in their orgies. I had learnt to drink, though without attaining to the German capacity of some of them; I could empty two or three bottles for my part without becoming very tipsy—very satisfactory progress. I made exquisite verses like a god, and I kissed deliberately enough the girls at the inn. In short I became an accomplished young cavalier in conformity with the latest fashion of the time. I rid myself of certain provincial ideas I had about virtue and other such-like notions. On the contrary, I became so extremely delicate on points of honor that I fought a duel almost daily; that same was become for me a necessity, a species of indispensable exercise, without which I should have ill carried myself all day. Also, when no one had looked at me, or trodden on my foot, and I had no motive for fighting, sooner than rest idle with nothing on my hands I would serve as second to my comrades, or the same to men whom I only knew by name. I had soon a colossal renown for bravery, and nothing less than that would have stopped the pleasantness which would have been infallibly suggested by my beardless face and effeminate appearance. But three or four surplus buttonholes that I opened in some doublets, and a few slices carved very delicately from some recalcitrant skins generally caused my appearance to be thought more manly than Mars in person, or Priapus himself, and men were to be found who swore they had held my bastards at the baptismal font. Beyond all this apparent dissipation and wasting life, I did not neglect the carrying out of my primary idea, that this is to say the conscientious study of man and the solution of the great problem of a perfect lover, a problem not less difficult to solve than the philosopher's stone. It is of certain ideas as of the horizon, which certainly exists when you see it in front of you whichever side you turn, but which obstinately flies before you, whether you step slowly or go at a gallop, and remains always at the same distance, for it cannot manifest itself except with a determined condition of distance, it is destroyed in a measure as you advance to form farther off its fleeting, unsatisfying azure, and it is in vain that you try to catch it by the border of its flying mantle. The more I advanced in the knowledge of the animal, the more I saw to what point the realization of my desire was impossible, and how far what I demanded for happily loving was beyond the condition of his nature. I was convinced that the man who would be most sincerely in love with me would find the means with the best will in the world to make me the most miserable of women, and still I had abandoned many of my girlish exigencies, I was fallen from sublime clouds, not altogether into the street and the kennel, but upon a hill of medium height, accessible, but a little steep. The climb, it is true, was rough enough; but I had the pride of believing that I was value for the trouble of the effort, and that I should be a sufficient compensation for the exertion required. I could never resolve to take a step forward. I waited patiently, perched on my summit. Here was my plan: under my manly dress I should make the acquaintance with some young man whose exterior pleased me. I should live familiarly with him; by some adroit questions and false confidences, which would provoke true ones, I should soon acquire a complete knowledge of his sentiments and his thoughts; and if I found him such as I wished, I should pretend to make a journey, and keep away from him for three or four months, to give him time to forget my features. Then I should return in my woman's costume, and arrange in a retired suburb a voluptuous little house hidden by trees and flowers. I should dispose things so that he met me and made love to me, and if he showed a true and faithful love for me I should give myself to him without restriction or precaution. The title of his mistress would have to me appeared honorable; I should not have demanded any other. But assuredly that plan will not be put in execution, for that is a plan's usual fate, and in that is displayed principally the frailty of the will and the pure nothingness of man. The proverb that what God wills woman wills is not more true than any other proverb; that is to say, not at all. So when I had only seen men at a distance and beyond my desire, they had appeared handsome to me and the eye had made an illusion. Now, at last, I found them frightful, and I could not understand how a woman could admit them into her bed. As to me, my heart turns against it; I could not bring myself to it. Their features are gross, ignoble, without elegance. What lines hurtful and unpleasant they have, how dark, and furrowed are their skins. Some are as swarthy as if they had been hanged for six months; they are emaciated, bony, hairy, with violin strings on their hands, and great feet like a drawbridge; a dirty mustache, is always full of food, and turned up like a hook to the ears; the long hair rough as the bristles of a broom, chin ending like that of a wild boar, the lips cracked and dry from strong liquors, eyes surrounded by three or four black rings, and the neck full of stretched veins, great muscles, and projecting cartilages. Others are mattresses of red meat, pushing before them a belly that their waist-belt will hardly encircle; they open and wink their little sea-green eyes, inflamed with luxury, and resemble much more a hippopotamus in trousers than human creatures. They smell always of wine or brandy or tobacco, or their natural odor, which is much the worst of all. As to those whose forms are a little less disgusting, they resemble ill-formed women—that is all.

I had not remarked all that I was in life as in a cloud, my feet hardly touching the earth. The odor of the roses and lilies of spring was borne to my head like too strong a perfume. I only dreamt of accomplished heroes, faithful and respectful lovers, flames of the altar, marvelous devotions and sacrifices, and I should have believed I had found all that in the first scoundrel that wished me good day. However, the first and greatest intoxication did not last long. Strange suspicions seized me, and I had no rest until I had cleared them away. At first the horror that I had for men was pushed to the last degree of exaggeration, and I regarded them as dreadful monstrosities; their manners, modes of thought, and negligent, cynical language, their brutalities and scorn of women shocked and revolted me to the last point of many of the ideas I had formed; very few were realized. They are not monsters if you will, but much worse than that, my faith! There are some excellent boys of very jovial humor, who eat and drink well, who will render you all sorts of services spirited and brave, good painters and good musicians who are good for a thousand things except, however, for the one for which they were created, viz. mate to the animal called woman, with whom they have not the slightest bearing, physical or moral. I had at first some trouble in disguising the contempt which they inspired me with, but little by little I accustomed myself to their manner of life. I felt no more piqued at the railleries they launched against women than if I had been of their sex. I made, on the contrary, some very good jests, the success of which strangely flattered my pride; assuredly none of my comrades went as far as I did in sarcasms and pleasantries on the subject. The perfect knowledge of the ground gave me a great advantage and beyond their piquant turn my brilliant epigrams shone from the merit of an exactitude which theirs often lacked. For much of the ill that is often said of women is not without some foundation; it is none the less difficult for men to preserve the indifference necessary to jest about them decently or properly, and there is often a deal of love in their invectives.

I noticed that it was those that were most tender and had the most feeling for women who treated them worse than the others, and who returned to the subject with a particular animosity, as if they had a mortal rancor on account of their not being what they wished, and falsifying the good opinion they conceived at first. That which I demanded before all was not physical beauty, it was beauty of the soul, love; but love as I feel it is perhaps not in the human possibilities—and yet it appears to me that I must love thus and that I give more than I exact. What magnificent folly! What sublime prodigality! To deliver yourself entirely without caring anything for self, renouncing the possession of yourself and your freedom of will, placing it in the hands of another, to see no more with your eyes or hear with your ears, being one in two bodies, to melt and mingle your souls in such fashion that you would not know if you were yourself or the other being, now the sun, now the moon, to see all the world created in one being only, displacing the center of life, to be ready at all times for the greatest sacrifices and the most absolute abnegation, to suffer in the bosom of the person loved as if it was your own, oh, wonder, to double yourself while giving yourself! That is love as I conceive it. Faithful as the ivy, entwining like the young vine, cooing as the turtledove, these are indispensable and are the first and most simple conditions.

If I had remained at home under the dress of my sex, sadly turning my wheel or working tapestry behind the embrasure of a windowpane, that which I have sought through the world would perhaps have found me of itself, for love is like fortune and dislikes being pursued. It visits of preference those that sleep beside the wells, and often the kisses of queens and gods descend upon closed eyes. There is one thing which lures and deceives you, the thought that all the adventures and all the happiness exist only in places where you are not, and it is a sad mistake to saddle your horse and post off after your ideal. Many people make that error, many others will still make it. The horizon is always the most charming azure, although when you arrive at the hills they are often composed of poor cracked clay or rain-washed ocher.

I had imagined that the world was full of adorable young men, and that on the roads one met battalions of Esplandians, Amadises, and Lancelots of the Lake pursuing their Dulcineas, and I was very much astonished that the world took very little heed of that sublime search and was content to share the bed of the first harlot that came in the way. I am well punished for my curiosity and distrust. I am used up in the most horrible manner possible without having had enjoyment.

With me knowledge has advanced before use; nothing is much worse than these forward experiences which are not the fruit of action. Ignorance the most complete would be a thousand times better. It would at least commit you to many foolish things which would serve to instruct and rectify your ideas; for under the disgust of which I was speaking there is always a lively and rebellious element which produces the most strange disorders: the spirit is convinced, the body is not, and will not subscribe to this superb disdain. The young and robust body acts and winces under the spirit like a vigorous stallion ridden by a feeble old man whom, however, he is unable to throw, for the curb holds the head and the bit tears his mouth.

Since I have lived with the men I have seen so many women unworthily betrayed, so many secret connections imprudently divulged, the most pure loves dragged through the mire, young men running to frightful courtesans leaving the arms of the most charming mistresses, the best-established intrigues broken suddenly and without plausible motive, that I now find it not possible to decide on taking a lover. It would be to throw oneself in full daylight with eyes open into a bottomless pit. However, the secret wish of my heart is still to have one. The voice of nature stifles the voice of reason. I feel strongly that I shall never be happy if I do not love and am not loved. But the misfortune is that one can only have a man for a lover, and if the men are not all devils they are very far from being angels. It would be useless to stick feathers on their shoulder blades and on their heads a halo of gilt paper. I know too much to be thus deceived.

All the fine things they might say to me would be of no avail. I know in advance what they will say and could say it myself. I have seen them studying their parts and rehearsing before going on the stage. I know their principal tirades by heart and the passages on which they count. Neither pallor of face nor alteration of features would convince me. I know that they prove nothing. A night of orgy, a few bottles of wine, and two or three girls are sufficient to wrinkle the face very conveniently. I have seen this fine trick practiced by a young marquis, by nature very rosy and fresh-colored, who found himself the better for it, for to that touching pallor he owed the crowning of his passion. I know also how the most languorous Celadons console themselves for the rigors of their Astræas and find means for being patient in awaiting the happy hour. I have seen slatterns serving as doubles for chaste Ariadnes.

In truth, after that no man tempts me much, for he has not beauty as the woman, beauty, that splendid vestment which disguises so well the soul's imperfection, that divine drapery cast by God over the nudity of the world which makes it in some way excusable to love the vilest courtesan of the kennel, if she possesses the magnificent and royal gift. In default of virtues of the soul I would at least have the exquisite perfection of form, satiny flesh, roundness of contour, softness of line, fineness of skin, in fact all that makes the charm of woman. Since I cannot have love I would have voluptuousness, imperfectly replacing the brother by the sister. But all the men I have seen appear to me to be frightfully ugly; my horse is a hundred times more handsome, and I should have less repugnance in embracing him than certain marvelous fellows who think themselves very charming. Certainly a fop like those I know would not be a very brilliant theme to embroider with variants of pleasure. A military man would hardly be more suitable for me; they have a mechanical walk, and there is something bestial in their faces which makes me consider them hardly human. The gentlemen of the robe delight me no more: they are dirty, oily, hairy, threadbare, with glassy eyes and lipless mouths; they smell extraordinarily rank and moldy, and I should have no inclination to put my face against their lynx or badger-like muzzles. As to poets, they think of nothing in the world but the endings of words, and go no farther back than to the penultimate, and it is true to say that they are difficult to conveniently utilize; they are more wearisome than the others, they are also ugly and have not the least distinction nor the least elegance in their figure, and their attire is truly singular. Some men who are occupied all the day with form and beauty perceive not that their boots are ill made and their hats ridiculous; they have the appearance of country apothecaries or trainers of learned dogs out of work, and would disgust you from poetry and verse for many eternities. Besides painters are also enormously stupid; they see nothing beyond the seven colors. One of two that I had passed some days with at R., and who was asked what he thought of me, made this ingenious reply: "He is warm in tone, and in the shadows pure Naples yellow should be employed instead of white with a little Cassel ocher and reddish brown." That was his opinion, and more, his nose was crooked, and his eyes as his nose, so they did not improve his appearance. Whom shall I take—a military man with a bulging chest, a limb of the law with convex shoulders, a poet or painter with a scared look, a thin little coxcomb without means? Which cage shall I choose in that menagerie? I ignore these completely, and I feel no inclination for one side or the other, for they are as perfectly equal as possible in foolishness and ugliness. After that there remains only one thing for me to do, that would be to take some one that I loved, whether a porter or a jockey! But I love not a porter, O unhappy heroine that I am, unmated turtle-dove condemned to elegiac cooings. Oh, how many times have I wished that I were truly a man as I appear to be. How many women I should have understood and whose hearts would have understood mine. How perfectly happy I should have been with those delicacies of love, those noble bursts of pure passion to which I should have been able to respond. What softness, what delights, as all the sensitiveness of my soul would have freely blossomed without being obliged to close and contract every minute under some coarse touch! What charming efflorescence of invisible flowers which never opened, and whose mysterious perfume would have sweetly embalmed the fraternal soul! It seems to me that would have been an enchanting life, an infinite ecstasy with wings outstretched, promenades with hands entwined, without releasing their hold under the avenues of golden foliage, through groves of eternally smiling roses, in parks full of fish-ponds with gliding swans and alabaster vases hanging amid the leaves. If I had been a young man how I should have loved Rosette; what adoration that would have been, our souls being truly made for each other, two pearls destined to melt together and so make but one. How perfectly would I have realized the idea that she had formed to love. Her character suited me completely, and her style of beauty pleased me. It is a pity that our love was totally condemned to indispensable platonism.

An adventure has lately happened to me. I used to go to a house where there was a very charming little girl about fifteen years old or more. I had never seen a more adorable miniature; she was fair, but so delicately and transparently fair that ordinary blondes would have appeared brown and as dark as moles beside her. One would have said that she had golden hair powdered with silver; her eyebrows were of a tint so soft and melting that they were hardly visible; her eyes, of a pale blue, had the most velvety look and the most silky lashes imaginable; her mouth, too small to put the tip of your finger into it, added still more to the childish and exquisite character of her beauty, and the soft roundness and the dimples of her cheeks had an inexpressible ingenuousness of charm. All her dear little person charmed me beyond expression. I loved her little frail white hands, transparent as the day, her bird-like foot which hardly touched the ground, her figure which a breath would have broken, and her pearly shoulders, not yet developed, that her scarf, put crosswise, happily betrayed. Her chatter, to which artlessness gave a new piquancy to her natural humor, engaged me for hours at a time, and I was singularly pleased in making her talk. She would utter a thousand delicious drolleries with an extraordinary fineness of intention, even without having apparently the least knowledge in the world of their meaning, thus making them a thousand times more attractive.

I gave her bonbons and sweets that I reserved expressly for her in a light shell box which pleased her very much, for she is as dainty as the true pussy-cat, which she is. As soon as I arrived she would run up to me and tap my pockets to see if the very pretty bonbon box was there, and I made her run from one hand to the other, and fight a little battle, which always ended by her gaining the upper hand and completely rifling me. One day, however, she contented herself with saluting me with a very grave air, and came not as she ordinarily did to see if the fountain of sweets was still flowing in my pockets. She remained proudly on her chair, quite upright, with her elbows drawn back.

"Ah well, Ninon," I said, "have you taken a fancy to salt now, or do you fear that bonbons will make your teeth fall out?" and in saying that I tapped the box, which gave from under my vest the most honeyed and sugary sound in the world.

She put out her little tongue halfway on the side of her mouth as if to taste the ideal sweetness of the absent bonbons, but she did not budge. Then I drew the box from my pocket, opened it, and began to religiously swallow the burnt almonds which she loved above all. The greedy instinct was for an instant stronger than her resolution; she put out a hand to take some, but drew it back immediately, saying:

"I am too big to eat sweets," and she gave a sigh.

"I have not perceived that you have grown much since last week; you are like the mushrooms, then, which grow up in a night. Come, let me measure you."

"Laugh as much as you will," she replied, with a charming pout. "I am not a little girl, and I will become very big."

"These are excellent resolutions in which you must persevere, and might I be able to know, my dear young lady, for what purpose these magnificent ideas have entered your head? For a week ago you appeared to find it very nice being little, and cracked your almonds without otherwise harming or compromising your dignity."

The little person regarded me with a singular air, moved her eyes around her, and when she was well assured that no one could hear us, she leaned towards me in a mysterious manner and said:

"I have a lover."

"The deuce! I am no longer astonished that you will not have any more sweets; you have, however, done wrong in not taking some; you might have played at dining with him or exchanged them for a shuttlecock."

The child made a disdainful movement with her shoulders and appeared to have a look of perfect pity for me as she resumed the attitude of an offended queen. I continued:

"What is the name of this glorious personage? Arthur, I suppose, or Henry," these being two little boys with whom she was in the habit of playing, and which she called her husbands.

"No, neither Arthur nor Henry," she said, fixing upon me her clear, transparent eyes, "a gentleman." She raised her hand above her head to give me an idea of his height.

"As tall as that? But this is serious. Who then is this tall lover?"

"Monsieur Theodore, I will tell you, but you must not speak about it to any one, neither to mamma nor to Polly (her governess) or to your friends, who, thinking me a child, would make fun of me."

I promised her the most inviolable secrecy, for I was very curious to know who this gallant personage was, and the child, seeing that I was treating the thing jocularly, hesitated to give me her entire confidence. Reassured by the word of honor that I gave her to be discreetly silent about it, she left her armchair, came and leant over the back of mine, and whispered very softly in my ear the name of the dear prince. I was confounded. It was the chevalier of G., a dirty-minded animal with the morals of a schoolmaster and the physique of a drummajor, one of the most intemperate debauched men it was possible to see, a true satyr without the feet of the goat and the pointed ears. That inspired me with serious fears for dear Ninon, and I promised myself that I would put the matter in good order.

Some people came in, and the conversation was stopped. I retired into a corner and sought in my head a way of hindering the thing from going farther, for it would have been a veritable disaster for such a delicious creature to fall into the hands of such an arrant scoundrel. The mother of the little one was a kind of gay woman, much given to play, and keeping a gambling house and a sort of literary salon. People read bad verses there and lost good crowns which compensated. She had very little love for her daughter, who was to her in a manner a sort of living certificate of baptism which prevented her from falsifying her chronology. Besides, the girl was growing up, and her youthful charms gave rise to comparisons which were not to the advantage of her prototype, who was already showing signs of wear through the friction of years. The child was thus neglected and left without a defense to the attacks of the scoundrels frequenting the house. If her mother had occupied herself with her it would have most probably been only to gain by her youth, and make a profit of her innocence and beauty; in one fashion or another there was no doubt as to the fate awaiting her. That gave me pain, for she was a charming little creature, a pearl of the first water, who assuredly merited a better fate than to be lost in that infected slough. That idea touched me to the quick, and I resolved to take her at all costs from that frightful house. The first thing to do was to hinder the chevalier from pursuing his object. The way I found the best and most simple was to seek a quarrel with him and so make him fight me, and I had the greatest trouble in the world to do so, for he is as cowardly as possible, and fears an encounter more than anything in the world. At last I said so many piquant things to him that he had to call me out, although much against his wish. I threatened also to have him thrashed by my footman if he did not make a better show. He knew well enough, however, how to hold his weapon, but fear troubled him to such an extent that our irons had hardly crossed before I found means to administer to him a pretty little thrust that sent him to bed for a fortnight. That satisfied me, for I had no desire to kill him, and I would much rather he lived to be hanged later on, a touching care for which he should have owed me more good-will. My rogue being extended between two sheets and duly bandaged, there remained only to persuade the child to leave the house, and this was not excessively difficult. I told her a tale about the disappearance of her lover, which gave her great anxiety. I said that he had gone off with an actress belonging to the company then at G.; that made her indignant, as you may imagine. But I consoled her by saying all sorts of ill of her chevalier, who was ugly, a drunkard, and already old, and ended by asking her if she would not like me better for her gallant. She replied that she would much, because I was more handsome and my clothes were new. That artlessness, spoken with enormous seriousness, made me laugh almost to tears. I raised the head of the child and succeeded so well that she decided to leave the house. A few bouquets, nearly as many kisses, and a pearl necklace that I gave her charmed her to an extent difficult to describe, and she assumed in the presence of her little friends a most laughable air of importance.

I had made a very rich and very elegant page's costume, not tight fitting, for I was not able to bring her away in girl's clothes, nor to put on woman's dress myself; for that I would not do. I bought her a little horse, quiet and easy to ride, and, yet, sufficiently good to follow my barb when it pleased me to go fast. Then I told the fair one to come down at dusk to the door and I would be there to take her. This she did very punctually; I found her keeping watch behind the half-opened door. I passed very near the house; she came out. I gave her my hand; she rested her foot on the point of mine and jumped very lightly up behind me, for she had marvelous agility. I spurred my horse, and by seven or eight deserted lanes I found means of returning to my house without any one seeing us. I made her exchange her dress for her disguise, myself acting as her chambermaid. She made at first some objections and would dress herself alone, but I made her understand that would lose much time, and besides, being my mistress, it was not the least improper and that it was the practice between lovers. It wanted no more to convince her, and she gave in to circumstance with the best grace in the world. Her body was a little marvel of delicacy; her arms though a little thin, like those of all young girls, were of inexpressible sweetness of line, and her growing bosom gave such charming promise, that when more formed it would be quite incomparable. She had still all the graces of the child and already all the charm of the woman. She was in that adorable stage of transition from the little girl to the young girl, that fugitive and delicious epoch where the beauty is full of hope, and where each day, in place of taking something from your love, adds to it new perfections. Her costume suited her well, it gave her a little mutinous air which was very curious and amusing, and made her burst out laughing when I presented her the mirror to judge the effect of her toilette. I afterwards made her eat some biscuits soaked in Spanish wine in order to give her courage and make her better able to bear the fatigues of the road.

The horses were waiting all saddled

in the court; she mounted hers with some deliberation, I bestrode the other, and we started. The night had completely fallen, and lights which occasionally appeared were being extinguished every moment, showing that the honest town of C. was virtuously occupied, as all country towns should be at the hour of nine. We were not able to go very fast, for Ninon was no better horsewoman than she should be, and when her horse began to trot she would cling with all her strength to his mane. However, on the following morning we were too far away to be overtaken, at least not without extreme diligence. But we were not pursued, or at least if we were it was in an opposite direction to that we had followed. I was singularly attached to the little fair one; I had no longer you with me, my dear Graciosa, and I experienced the immense want of loving some one or something, of having a dog or a child to caress lovingly; Ninon was that to me. She had no doubt that I was a man. Her youth and extreme innocence kept her in that error. The kisses that I gave her perfectly completed the illusion, for her ideas had not yet gone beyond that, and nothing so far had led her to suspect anything else. Besides, she was only partly deceived, and really there was the same difference between her and me as there is between me and the men. She was so transparent, so slender, so light, of so choice and delicate a nature. I am tall and dark, she is short and fair; her features are so soft that they make mine appear almost hard and austere, and her voice is such a melodious warble that mine appears harsh compared with hers. I always fear that the wind will carry her off some fine morning. I should like to enclose her in a box of cotton-wool and carry her suspended from my neck. You cannot imagine, my good friend, how much of grace and wit she has. Her delicious purrings, her childish caresses, her little ways and pretty manners are delightful; she is the most adorable creature on earth, and it would have been truly a pity had she remained with her unworthy mother. I took a malicious joy in stealing away that treasure from the rapacity of men. I was the griffin which hindered them from approaching her. I purposed to keep her in ignorance as long as possible, and to keep her near me until she would stay no longer, or until I had assured a safe place for her.

In her little boy's costume I took her in all my travels right and left. This kind of life pleased her singularly, and the pleasure that she took in it helped to support the fatigues. Everywhere I was complimented on the exquisite beauty of my page, and I doubt not it gave rise in the minds of many to a suspicion exactly the opposite of the truth. Many persons tried to unravel the mystery, but I did not let the little one speak to anybody, and the curious were all disappointed. Every day I discovered in that amiable child some new quality which made me cherish her more and congratulate myself on the resolution I had taken. Assuredly men were not worthy of possessing her, and it would have been deplorable if so many charms of body and soul had been delivered to their brutal appetites and cynical depravity. A woman only could love her delicately and tenderly enough. One side of my character which could not have been developed in any other connection, was quite brought out in this adventure, that was the desire and inclination to afford protection, a virtue which is habitually the business of men. It would have displeased me if I had taken a lover, if he had given himself the air of defending me, for the reason that this is a care I love to take with the people that please me, and that my pride is found better suited with the first part than the second, although the second may be more agreeable. Also I felt pleased to give to my dear little one all the cares and protection possible, such as helping her on difficult roads, holding her bridle or stirrup, serving her at table, undressing and putting her to bed, defending her if any one insulted her, in short, doing for her all that the most passionate and attentive lover would do for an adored mistress. I insensibly lost the idea of my sex, though at the beginning I hardly remembered that I was a woman. I often only just escaped saying something that was not consistent with the dress I wore. Now this never happened; though when I write to you, who knows my secret, in confidence I sometimes keep an unnecessary virility in my adjectives. If I ever have a fancy to go and seek my skirts in the drawers, or where I may have left them, which I very much doubt, unless I become amorous of some young beau, I shall have a difficulty in losing these habits, and in place of being a woman disguised as a man, I shall have the appearance of a man disguised as a woman.

I had forgotten to tell you that Rosette, having discovered where I was gone, had written me a most suppliant letter, begging me to go and see her. I was not able to refuse, and I rejoined her in the country where she was. I have returned there many times since, and quite lately Rosette, despairing of ever having me for a lover, has thrown herself into the whirlpool of society and dissipation, as do all tender souls who are not religious, when they are robbed of their first love. She had many adventures in a short time, and the list of her conquests were already very long, for every one had not the same reasons for resisting her as I had. She had with her a young man named d'Albert who was at that time her accepted lover. I appeared to make quite a particular impression on him and he took from the first a very strong liking to me. Although he treated her with much respect, and his manners were tender enough in the main towards her, he did not love Rosette, not from satiety or distaste, but rather because she did not respond to certain ideas, true or false, which he had formed of love and beauty. An ideal phantom interposed between her and him, and hindered him from being as happy as he would have been without it. Evidently his dream was not accomplished, and he sighed after something else. But he did not seek it, and remained faithful to the bonds that weighed upon him, for he has more delicacy in his soul than most men, and his heart is very far from being as corrupt as his mind. Not knowing that Rosette had ever been in love except with me, and that she was so still, and notwithstanding all her intrigues and follies, he feared to grieve her by letting her see that he did not love her, and out of consideration, sacrificed himself in the most generous manner possible. The beauty of my features pleased him extraordinarily, for he attached an extreme importance to external form. So much so that he became amorous of me in spite of my man's attire and the formidable rapier that I carried by my side. I avow that I admired him for the fineness of his instinct, and that I felt for him some esteem for having penetrated through my disguise. In the beginning he believed himself cursed with a most depraved taste, though in effect he was not, and I laughed inwardly to see him thus torment himself. He had sometimes, when speaking to me, a frightened look which very much amused me, and the natural inclination he felt towards me appeared to him a diabolical impulse which should be strongly resisted. On these occasions he would fall back upon Rosette with fury, and endeavor to correct himself with more orthodox love-making; then he would return to me more strongly attracted than before. Then the luminous idea that I might be a woman glided into his mind. To convince himself of this he set himself to observe and study me with the most minute attention. He must know each particular hair, also how many I have on my eyelids, my feet, hands, neck, cheeks, even the down at the corner of my lips; he has examined, compared, and analyzed them all, and from that investigation, in which the artist aided the lover, it seemed clear as the day (when it is clear) that I was well and duly a woman, and moreover his ideal; his type of beauty, the reality of his dream. Marvelous discovery!

It only remained to move me to pity, and grant the gift of amorous mercy, to prove entirely my sex. A comedy which we played, and in which I appeared as a woman, completely decided him. I cast him a few equivocal glances, and made use of some passages in my part analogous to our situation to embolden him and make him to declare himself. For if I did not love him passionately he pleased me well enough to prevent me from leaving him to die of a broken heart; and as he was the first since my transformation to have any suspicion that I was a woman, it was quite right that I should enlighten him on this important point, and I was resolved not to leave him the shadow of a doubt. He came many times into my room with his declaration on his lips, but dared not utter it; for really it is difficult to speak of love to some one who is dressed like yourself and is putting on riding-boots. At last, not being able to take upon himself to speak, he wrote me a very long, very Pindaric letter, in which he explained to me at great length that I knew better than he did. I do not quite know what I ought to do; admit his request or reject it. The latter would be immoderately virtuous, besides his grief at being refused would be too great. If we make unhappy the people we love what shall we do to those we hate? Perhaps it would be strictly more becoming to be cruel for a time, and to wait at least a month before unfastening the tigress's skin and putting humanity into a chemise.

But since I have resolved to yield to him, at once is as good as later on; I do not think much of these fine mathematical resistances in which one hand is surrendered to-day, another to-morrow, then the foot, then the leg, and the knee as far as the garter, nor of those intractable virtues always ready to pull the bell if you overstep the mark which they have fixed for the day. It makes me laugh to see those methodical Lucretias walking backwards with signs of the most virginal fright, and throwing from time to time a furtive look over their shoulder, to assure themselves that the sofa where they must fall is directly behind them. That is a precaution I could never take. I do not love d'Albert, at least in the sense that I give to that word; but I have certainly a liking and inclination for him; his wit pleases me, and his person does not repel me. There are not many men of whom I can as much. He has not all, but he has something. What pleases me in him, is that he does not seek to satiate himself brutally like other men; he has a perpetual aspiration and an ever sustained longing for the beautiful, towards material beauty only it is true, but it is still a noble inclination, and one which is sufficient to keep him in pure regions. His conduct with Rosette proves his honesty of heart, honesty more rare than the other if it is possible; and then, if I must tell you, I am possessed with the most violent desires. I languish and I die of voluptuousness, for the dress I wear, while engaging me in all sorts of adventures with women, protects me only too perfectly against the enterprises of men. An idea which I never realize floats vaguely in my head, and that inspid and colorless dream fatigues and wearies me. Many women placed amidst the most chaste lead the lives of courtesans, and I, by a funny contrast, remain virgin and chaste as the cold Diana herself, in the midst of the wildest dissipation and surrounded by the greatest debauchees of the age. This bodily ignorance, unaccompanied by ignorance of the mind, is the most miserable thing possible. So that my flesh shall not pride itself over my spirit I will profane it equally, if it is a greater profanation than eating or drinking, which I very much doubt. In a word, I will find out everything there is to be learned. Since d'Albert has recognized me under my disguise, it is very just that he should be rewarded for his penetration. He is the first to divine that I was a woman, and I shall do my best to prove to him that his suspicions were well founded. It would be most uncharitable to let him believe that he had a monstrous taste. It is d'Albert then who will solve my doubts and give me my first lesson in love. I shall agitate no further now, but bring about the climax in a poetic manner. I am inclined not to reply to his letter, and to look coldly on him for some days when I see him very sad and despairing, inveighing against the gods, shaking his fist at creation, and regarding the wells, to see if they are not too deep to throw himself into them. I shall throw my ass's skin to the end of the corridor and put on my cultured robe, that is to say my costume as Rosalind, for my feminine wardrobe is very restricted. Then I shall go to him, radiant as a peacock with outspread tail, showing that which I ordinarily conceal with great care, and wearing only a little circlet of lace round my throat, very low and very loose, and say to him in the most pathetic tone that I am able to assume. "O very elegiac and perspicacious young man, I am truly a young and modest beauty who adores you into the argain, and who desires to share her leasures with you. See if that suits ou, and if you have still any scruples, ouch this, go in peace, and sin the most that you can." This fine discourse ended, I shall let myself fall half-swooning into his arms, uttering melancholy sighs; I shall adroitly let the hook of my dress become unfasened in a manner that will leave me in strict costume, that is to say, in part nude. D'Albert will do the rest, and I hope that the next morning I shall know all about those fine things that I have troubled my brain for a long time. In satisfying my curiosity I shall have, moreover, the pleasure of making one happy. I also propose to go and pay Rosette a visit in the same dress, and let her see that if I have not responded to her love it is not from coldness or distaste. I do not wish her to hold a bad opinion of me, and she deserves as much as d'Albert that I should betray my disguise in her favor. What a look of surprise she will assume at the revelation! Her pride will be consoled, but her love will lament. Good-by, all beautiful and all good; pray the good God that I may not think as little of the pleasure as those that bestow it. I have joked all through this long letter, and yet what I am going to undertake is a serious thing, which I may feel for the rest of my life.

Chapter XVI

D'ALBERT'S LOSS

It was now more than a fortnight since d'Albert had deposited his amorous epistle on Theodore's table, and still there seemed no change in the latter's attitude. D'Albert was at a loss to understand this silence. Had his precious epistle gone astray or got lost? This seemed hardly likely, for Theodore had returned to his room directly after, and it would indeed have been extraordinary had he failed to perceive a great paper lying by itself in the middle of the table in a manner to attract the attention of even the most unobservant. Or was it that d'Albert was entirely mistaken and Theodore was really a man, or, in case she were a woman, had she so pronounced a feeling of contempt that she did not deign to give herself the trouble to reply.

Unlike ourselves, our dear d'Albert had not the advantage of perusing the correspondence of Graciosa, the confidante of the beautiful de Maupin, so he was not in a position to decide affirmatively or negatively any of these important questions, and he fluctuated sadly in the most miserable irresolution.

One evening he was in his room, his forehead leaning sadly against the windowpane, looking gloomily at the chestnut trees in the park, the leaves of which were already reddening and drooping. A thick mist obscured the horizon, and the deepening twilight only served to increase his misery. A large swan plunging his long neck into the streaming water of the river was the only visible living thing which animated a little the gloomy landscape. D'Albert was dreaming as sadly as any man may dream at five o'clock in the evening in the dusk of autumn, a disappointed man, a sharp north wind for his music, and the skeleton of a leafless forest for his outlook. He thought of throwing himself into the river, but the water seemed very black and very cold. Having no pistol, shooting himself was out of the question. In despair, he went so far as to wish to resume his acquaintance with women who were perfectly insupportable to him, and whom he should have had whipped out of his house by his servants. He finished by deciding upon something still more terrible—the writing of a second letter. O threefold idiot!

He was in the midst of these meditations when he felt a hand placed on his shoulder like a little dove alighting upon a palm tree—the comparison limps a little, inasmuch as d'Albert's shoulder bears little resemblance to a palm tree. Still, we will conserve the pure Orientalism. The hand was joined to an arm attached to a shoulder which formed part of the body of none other than Theodore, Rosalind, Mademoiselle d'Aubigny, or Madelaine de Maupin, to call her by her true name. We, who fully anticipated such a visit, are not in the least astonished, but d'Albert, who had no inkling of it, gave vent to a little cry of surprise. Here was indeed Rosalind, so beautiful and so radiant that she lit up all the rooms with the strings of pearls in her hair, her prismatic dress with the lace front, her red-heeled shoes, and her handsome fan of peacock's plumes, in short, such as she was on the day of the performance. Only, and this difference was important and decisive, she wore neither scarf, ruff, nor anything that would hide from view her perfect figure. A beautiful bosom, white and smooth as the purest marble, boldly projected beyond her low-cut dress.

"Ah well, Orlando; do you not recognize your Rosalind, or have you left your love hanging with your sonnets on some bushes in the forest of Arden? Are you yet cured of the passion which you vowed that I alone had power to assuage? I am afraid you are."

"Oh no, Rosalind, I am worse than ever. I am in agony; I am dead, or very near it."

"You look exceedingly well for a dead man. Many living ones look much worse."

"What a week I have passed! You cannot imagine it, Rosalind. I hope it may be reckoned of equal value to a thousand years of purgatory in another world. But if I dare, may I ask why you have not replied to me sooner?"

"Why? I hardly know, unless it was because I did not. However, if this does not appear to you, a valid motive, here are three others, much worse, from which you may choose. First, carried away by your passion, you did not write legibly, so that it has taken me more than a week to make out what was in your letter; next, because my modesty would not allow me in less time to nurture such an absurd idea as that of taking a dithyrambic poet for my lover; and then, because I was anxious to see if you would attempt to blow out your brains and hang yourself with your garters. There!"

"Oh! do not jest; I assure you that you have done well in coming to-day. You might not have found me to-morrow."

"Really, poor boy? Do not assume such a sorrowful, weeping air, for it affects me also, and if once I loose the floodgates of my sensibility, I warn you you will be completely submerged. Just now I gave you three bad reasons. I now offer you three good kisses. There!"

Her debt discharged, and still greatly moved, she sat down on d'Albert's knee, and passing her fingers through his hair, she said to him:

"All my cruelties are exhausted, my sweet friend. I have taken this fortnight to satisfy my ferocity. Perhaps I found it as long as you. Do not become conceited because of my frankness, but that is true. I do not demand of you an oath of eternal love, nor any exaggerated protestations. Love me as much as the good God wills. That is all I ask. I will do as much on my side. I will not call you a perfidious wretch when you love me no more; and you will have the goodness to spare me the corresponding odious titles. If I should happen to leave you I shall only be a woman that has ceased to love you; nothing more. It is not necessary to hate me all through life because of one or two love passages. Whatever may happen, and wherever destiny may drive me, I swear to you, and this is a promise that one may keep, that I will always have a charming remembrance of you; and if I am no more your mistress, I shall be your friend, as I have been your comrade. For you I have put aside this night my manly dress. I shall resume it to-morrow for good. Dream that I am Rosalind at night. All the day I am and can only be Theodore de Sérannes."

Any further utterance was checked by a long kiss which d'Albert planted full on her lips, followed by others too numerous to count. As the earnest entreaties of d'Albert became more tender and more pressing, the beautiful features of Theodore, instead of being blooming and radiant, took an expression of proud melancholy which gave her lover much uneasiness.

"Why, my dear sovereign, have you the chaste and serious air of an antique Diana, when it would be much better to have the smiling lips of Venus rising from the sea?"

"My dear d'Albert, it is because I am more like the huntress Diana than anything else. I had taken when very young the dress of a man, for some reasons it would be tedious and useless to tell you. You alone have divined my sex, and if I have made conquests they have been over women; very superfluous conquests they have been, and more than once most embarrassing. In a word, I have always preserved my virginity, and that is why I am sad, now that I feel that I may not be able to give to-morrow that which I had to-day."

As she spoke, she parted with two beautiful hands the young man's long hair, and pressed upon his pale forehead her soft lips. D'Albert, singularly moved by the soft and solemn tone in which she had spoken, took her hands and kissed all the fingers one after the other, then very delicately broke the lacing of her dress, so that the corsage opened, the two white treasures appearing in all their splendor.

Filled with a new passion, d'Albert clasped her in his arms, covering with kisses her shoulders and bosom. The hair of the half-swooning girl became loosened. She remained quite upright, like a white apparition. The enchanted lover knelt down, and had soon thrown, each into an opposite corner of the apartment, the two pretty little shoes with red heels.

She thus remained in all the transparent luster of her beautiful form, in the soft light of an alabaster lamp that d'Albert had lighted.

The young enthusiast for beauty was not able to satisfy his eyes on a spectacle like this, for we must say, to the immense praise of Rosalind, that this time the reality was above the dream, and he did not experience the slightest disappointment. Everything was united in the beautiful body which posed before him—delicacy and strength, form and color, the lines of a Greek statue of the best era, and the tone of a Titian. He saw there, palpable and crystallized, the cloudy fancy that he had many times vainly striven to halt in its flight. He was not forced, in the manner he used to complain of so bitterly to his friend Silvio, to confine his gaze to one part, well enough formed, not passing beyond it on pain of seeing something frightful, and his amorous eye descended from the head to the feet, ascended from the feet to the head, always sweetly endeared by a correct and harmonious form. The knees were admirably pure, the ankles elegant and fine, the body glossy as an agate, the bosom would make the gods come down from heaven to kiss arms and shoulders of the most magnificent character. A torrent of beautiful brown hair, lightly crisped, such as one sees on the heads painted by old masters, fell in little waves along an ivory back of which it marvelously heightened the whiteness.

The painter satisfied, the lover resumed the ascendancy, for though one has some love of art, there are things that one cannot merely look for any length of time satisfactorily.

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Instead of returning to her own room Rosalind went straight to that of Rosette. Theodore did not appear either at dinner or supper. D'Albert and Rosette did not appear surprised at this. He went to bed in good time, and the following morning, as soon as it was daylight, without informing any one, saddled his horse and that of his page and left the castle, telling a footman that they were not to wait dinner for him, and that he might not perhaps return for some days. D'Albert and Rosette were very much astonished, not knowing to what to attribute this strange disappearance, d'Albert above all. At the end of the week the unhappy, disappointed lover received a letter from Theodore which we shall transcribe. I much fear that it will not satisfy my readers, male or female, but in truth the letter was written thus and not otherwise, and this glorious romance shall have no other conclusion.

"You are no doubt greatly surprised, my dear d'Albert, at what has transpired. After doing what I have done, I will permit you to be so, for you have the right. You have already given me at least twenty of those epithets that we were agreed should be erased from our vocabulary, perfidious, inconstant, villainous. Is it not so? At least you will not call me virtuous, or cruel, and that will be something gained. You curse me and you are wrong. You had an inclination for me, I was your ideal; very well. I accorded to you at once what you desired. You might have had it much sooner. I served as body for your dream, with the readiest complaisance in the world. I gave you that which I shall assuredly not give to any one again, a surprise on which you hardly counted, and, knowing which, should have your good will. Now that I have satisfied you, it pleases me to go away. What is there so monstrous in this? What would you have more? You would continue till you were disgusted with me. I can hear you from here crying out most gallantly that I am not one of those which disgust you. But it would be the same with me as the others. It may last six months, two years, ten years, if you will, but the end always must come. You would keep me from sentiments of propriety, or perhaps because you would not have the courage to dismiss me. What good is it to wait for that end? And then perhaps I might cease to love you. I have found you charming. Perhaps by dint of seeing you I should find you become detestable. Pardon me this supposition. In living with you in great intimacy, I should without doubt have occasion to see you in a cotton cap, or in some funny or ridiculous domestic situation. You would necessarily lose the romantic and mysterious side that seduced me above all things, and your character, better understood, would no longer appear strange to me. I should be less occupied with you if I had you near me, in the same way that we treat books which we never open because we have them in our libraries. Your nose or your wit would not seem as well turned. I should perceive that your coat was ill-fitting or that your hose were untidy. I should have a thousand awakenings of this kind which would have singularly pained me, and at the end I should have arrived at the conclusion that you had neither heart nor soul, and that I was destined to be misunderstood in love. You adore me and I you. You have not the slightest reproach to make me, and I have not the least complaint in the world to make against you. I have been particularly faithful to you all throughout our amour. I have deceived you in nothing. I had neither false bosom nor false virtue; you had the extreme goodness to say that I was more beautiful than you had imagined because of the beauty I gave you. You gave me much pleasure. We are quits. I go my way, you go yours. Perhaps we may meet again at the Antipodes. Live in that hope.

"You believe perhaps that I do not love you because I leave you. You will recognize the truth of this later on. If I had done less in your case I should have remained, and would have poured out the insipid beverage to the dregs. Your love would have soon expired from weariness; after some time you would quite have forgotten me, and reading my name over in the list of your conquests, you would have asked, who on earth was this? I have at least the satisfaction of thinking that you will remember me rather than another. Your unsatisfied desire opens still its wings to fly to me. I shall be always something desirable to you, where your fancy loves to return, and I hope that in the bed of any mistresses you may have, you will sometimes dream of me. You never will be more amiable than you were on a very happy evening, and at the same time, if you were, it would really be somewhat less, for in love as in poetry to remain at the same point is to go back. Hold to that impression; you will do well. You have made the task of the lovers, I may have a difficult one (if I have other lovers), and no one will be able to efface your remembrance. They shall be the heirs of Alexander. If you grieve too much at losing me burn this letter, which is the sole proof that you have had me, and you will believe you have had a beautiful dream. What hinders you? The vision has vanished before the day, at the time when dreams return home by the horn or ivory gate. How many are dead who, less happy than you, have not given even one kiss to their ideal. I am not capricious, nor mad, nor a conceited prude. My action is the result of profound conviction. It is not to inflame you more or from calculated coquetry that I have departed from C. Do not try to follow me or find me again. You will not succeed. My precautions to conceal myself from you are too well taken. You will always be to me the man who opened up for me a world of new sensations. These are things that a woman does not easily forget. Although absent I think of you often, more often than if you were with me. Console to the best of your ability poor Rosette. Love well, both of you, and remember me whom you both loved, and sometimes speak my name in a kiss."